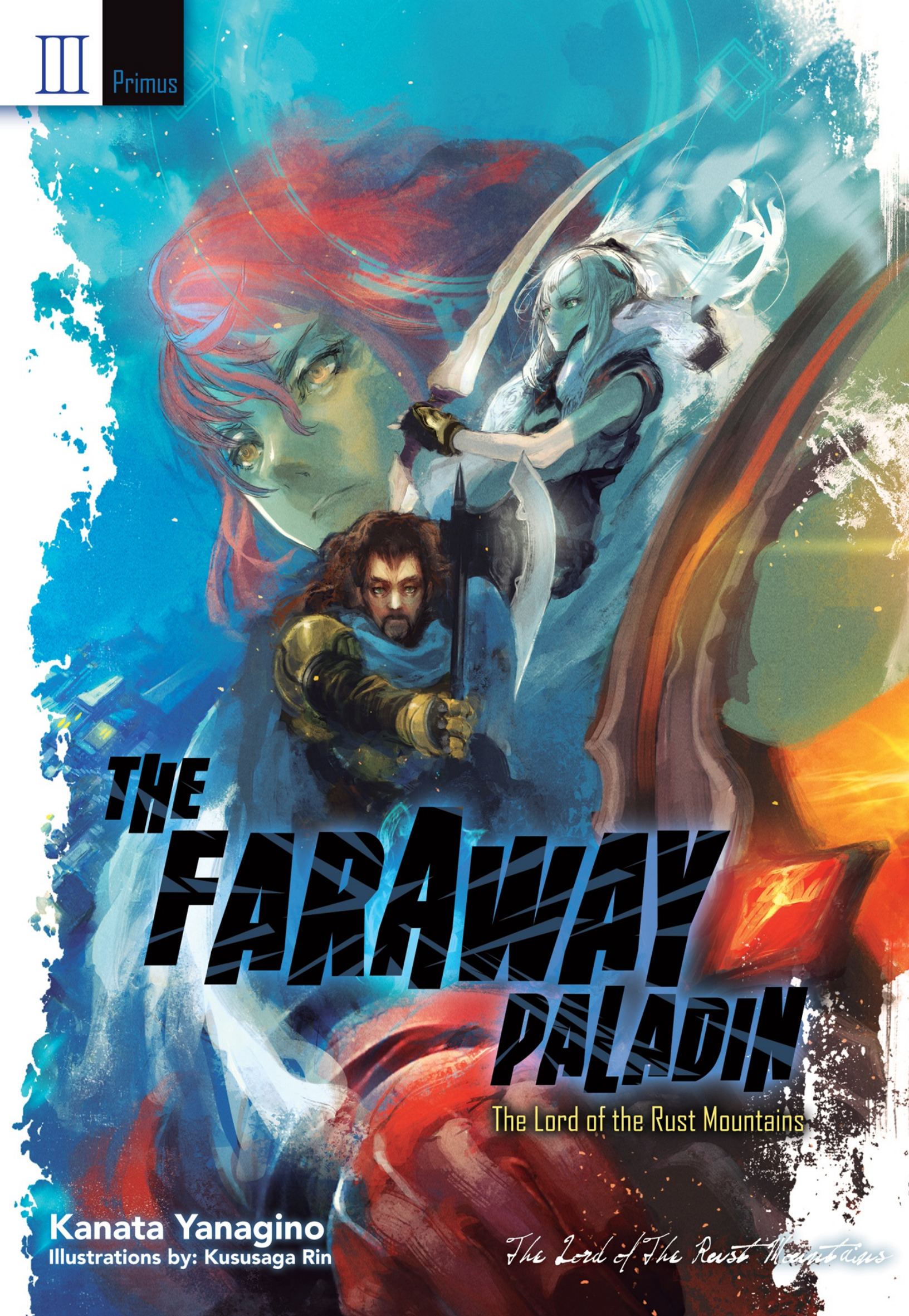




Primus

A dynamic, painterly illustration in a style reminiscent of anime or manga. It features three main characters: a large, close-up face of a woman with long, flowing red hair and golden eyes in the upper left; a man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a blue tunic and holding a sword, in the center; and a woman with long white hair and a blue tunic, holding a sword, in the upper right. The background is a swirling mix of blue, red, and orange, suggesting a dramatic, high-stakes scene. The title 'THE FARAWAY PALADIN' is written in large, bold, black letters with a blue outline, and 'The Lord of the Rust Mountains' is written in a smaller, yellow, serif font below it.

THE FARAWAY PALADIN

The Lord of the Rust Mountains

Kanata Yanagino
Illustrations by: Kususaga Rin

The Lord of The Rust Mountains

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III

Primus

THE FARAWAY PALADIN

The Lord of the Rust Mountains

Kanata Yanagino
Illustrations by: Kususaga Rin

The Lord of The Rust Mountains



THE FARAWAY PALADIN III (PRIMUS) THE LORD OF THE RUST MOUNTAINS



I could hear the sound of trees cracking. Accompanied by the dreadful sound of living trees being torn apart, a giant appeared who was over three meters tall and wearing fur.



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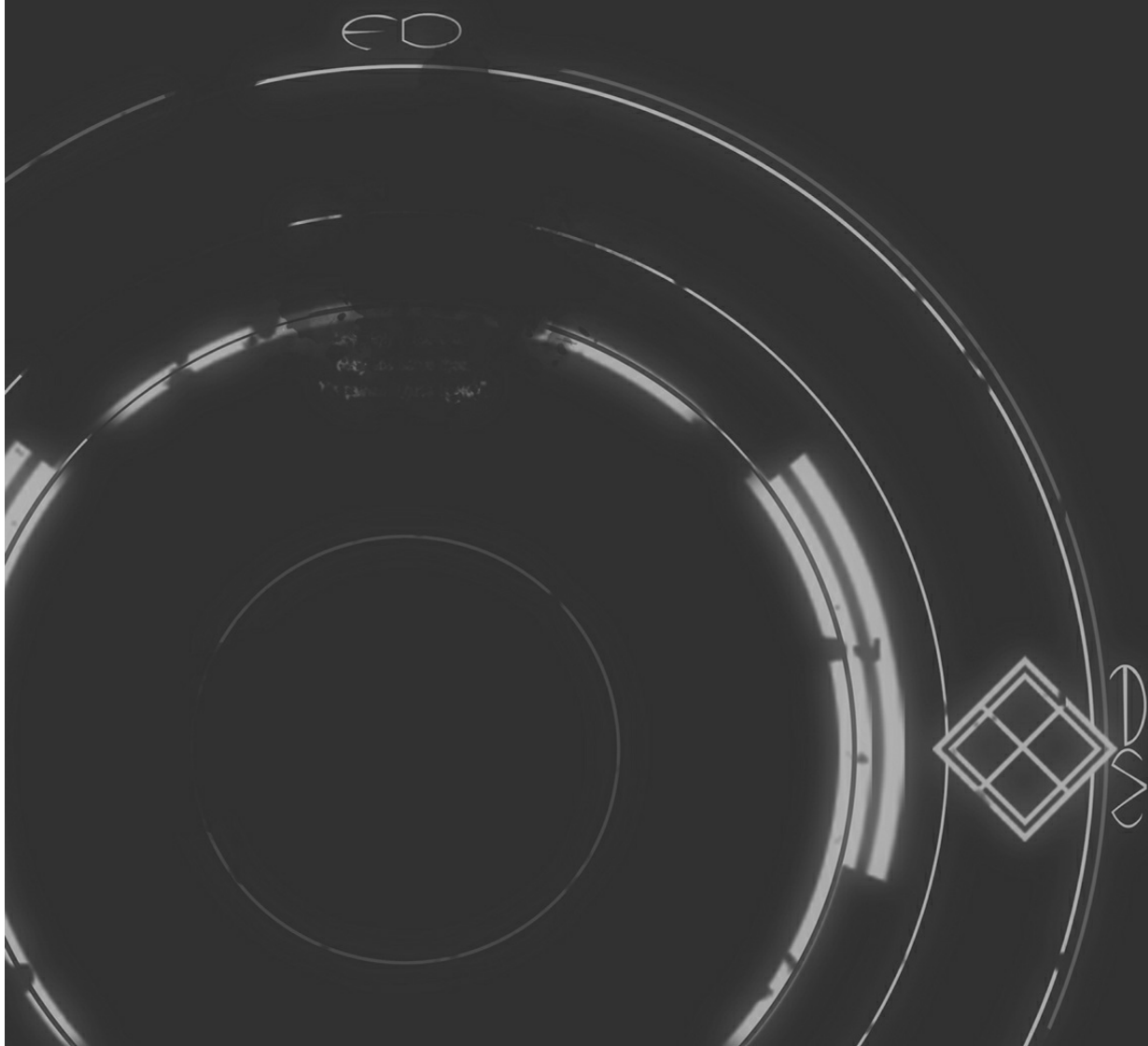
Illustrations: Kususaga Rin

Illustration and Typesetting Design: Kimura Design Lab

So asked Blaze,
god of fire and craft:

"What is the nature of valor?"

Prologue



Deep in Beast Woods, the domain of its great lord—the Lord of Holly—had been transformed into a hell of swirling miasma, rotten leaves, and withered trees. Misshapen figures spilled out in droves from the paths ahead leading into the center of the lord’s domain. They were low-ranked demons called Spawn.

Under refreshing early summer sunshine ill-suited to this place, we sprinted through dead trees that reminded me of the ribs of a rotten corpse.

“Menel!”

“On it!”

Silver hair fluttered. Menel came to a halt, spread his arms, and called out to the fae in a clear voice.

““Fairies of all kinds, faint spirits, those who play in the twilight and the morning mist—”

As I listened to him incant behind me, I moved forward with my favorite spear, Pale Moon.

““Awaken! Your gentle guardian, the lord of the woods, is in crisis! Now is the time to repay the kindness you have been shown!”

Nature’s power had been weakened in this place swirling with noxious gas. The fairies here had lost their power, and their sense of self had begun to dissipate, but Menel’s strong call began to restore it. Even I could feel the fairies beginning to congregate around him, as if drawn to his clear voice.



A natural power great enough to send shivers down my spine was beginning to gather where he stood.

“Grip your blades, nock your bows! Arrow of Salamander, Hammer of Gnome, Spear of Undine, Blade of Sylph...”

Knowing I could count on him, I focused all my attention on the approaching Spawn, which were shaped like vaguely person-shaped clay figures made by children. Brandishing my spear, I impaled them and swept them away one after another.

“Now the horns of war hath sounded! These arrogant invaders—”

His incantation had come to its final line. With a powerful yell, I tackled one of the Spawn with my shield, sent it flying into the incoming horde, and then took a huge leap backwards to the side.

“—May the Great Four damn them all!”

The instant he finished, a storm of death erupted before my eyes. Flaming arrows, suddenly fired, struck the enemies like a volley from a team of professional archers. Huge hammers of rock rose, blowing away miasma as they lifted into the air, then smashed down upon the demons. Clear water spouted out of lakes of sludge, drew helices in the air, and bored through the demons' chests. And in the distance, blades of raging wind scattered the miasma and sent head after enemy head flying. It was a full-scale attack by the elementals who had responded to Menel's call with furious cries of their own.

“Will! Let's go!”

“Got it!”

We rushed onward, stepping over the fallen corpses of the Spawn. Whatever had poisoned the Lord of Holly's domain and corrupted the natural cycle of these woods was just ahead. We ran, kicking up the sickly, fallen leaves.

Just in front of the old stone arch that formed the entrance to the center of the lord's domain were two demons, both of which looked like a cross between a person and a crocodile. One had a hooked spear in hand, and the other a long, sharp sword. I guessed they were about two meters in height. Their heads

brought dinosaurs to mind, and they had tough scales, rubbery skin, and thick muscles. There were sharp spikes on the ends of their peculiarly long tails. They were Commander-ranked demons called vraskuses.

“Watch out for the tail spikes!”

“Ya. You take the spear one!”

We kept it brief and split to the left and right. The vraskuses followed suit and headed towards us, each aiming for its own opponent.

I took a single breath and slowed down before finally stopping in a defensive stance and pointing the blade of my spear directly at the vraskus as it closed in at a speed halfway between a walk and a run.

We were almost within a spear’s distance of each other when it abruptly stopped in its tracks, as if it was unsure of itself. Its reptilian eyes rolled unblinkingly over me, and the vraskus tried circling around to my right and then my left, thrusting its hooked spear in my direction several times. With slight foot movements, I kept myself facing the demon and my blade pointed towards it. The vraskus growled, seemingly frustrated. It couldn’t find an opening to attack.

While keeping that distance between us, I very slowly relaxed my stance in a way almost too subtle to notice and created an opportunity for the vraskus to exploit. Sure enough, it lunged out with its hooked spear, trying to take that advantage. With a grunt, I slammed my own spear against it so that it caught and forced the hooked spear downwards. Refusing the vraskus any time to react, I thrust Pale Moon forward in retaliation and penetrated straight through the vraskus’s hard scales and then its heart.

The demon let out a choked cry of pain. I drew my spear back swiftly and stabbed twice more for good measure, still not allowing a counterattack.

When it came to demons of this rank, it often took a lot more for an injury to be fatal than it would for a human. If I didn’t make sure the vraskus was dead, it wouldn’t be surprising if it continued to fight me like mad, even with a hole punched through its heart.

I pulled the blade out once more and watched. The vraskus collapsed, its large

body hitting the ground knees first. The corpse turned to ash and crumbled away. I breathed out, and a nostalgic voice revived at the back of my mind.

— *I could just charge straight in there and lop its head off.*

I chuckled to myself. That was what my dad, Blood, had said when he'd once rated the strength of a vraskus. Unfortunately, I had yet to reach his level. I didn't know how much more training I'd need to catch up with Blood, but I felt as though I was at least close enough now to see his back in the distance.

An energetic shout from beside me told me that Menel's battle was also finished.

After the two sized each other up for a while, Menel's vraskus had shielded itself with one of its arms, which it was obviously prepared to lose, and charged at him. However, gnomes had grabbed its ankles from behind, causing it to lose its balance. Menel hadn't cast a spell to do that; he was in perfect communion with the fairies, and they were carrying out his will. It was something only an expert could have pulled off.

Menel stepped forward decisively and forced his dagger into the demon, then channeled some kind of spell down the blade, causing an explosion in the vraskus's torso. The creature twitched and convulsed, expelled some kind of white smoke, and collapsed. It was over.

"Sweet. And I'll take this, too." Menel showed no hesitation in snatching the longsword from the body as it crumbled to ashes. It looked like quite a fine weapon, with a shiny, metallic gleam to the steel of its straight blade.

"The altar for the lord of the forest should be... through here," I said.

"If Commander demons are the gatekeepers, then..."

"Yeah."

Whatever had come here was a force to be reckoned with. We exchanged looks, renewed our sense of caution, and stepped through the stone arch into the true heart of the Lord of Holly's domain.



The domain had been turned into a stinking, toxic bog. While Menel was

busily casting Waterwalk on the two of us, I increased our resistance to the toxic air with the prayer of Anti-Poison.

I took a good look at our surroundings and saw that beyond the withered forest's curtain of broken branches and discolored leaves, there was a huge old tree. Its height wasn't so different from the trees surrounding it, but it was obviously thicker. In fact, its trunk was so big and so thick that when I attempted to estimate its circumference by imagining my arms wrapped around it, I immediately felt foolish for even trying. Once we got closer, it would probably look like nothing more or less than a sheer wall of rock.

"Menel."

"Yeah. That's the Lord of Holly. He rules over this region of forest in winter."

Around the old tree, roots as thick as bridges undulated like waves on the ocean's surface. They were stained black half along their length, probably affected by the poisonous swamp that was covering the ground. Surrounded by those enormous, heaving black roots, there was a stone altar.

"That's gotta be it," Menel said.

As we approached, I could hear a Word of Creation booming out. I could tell just by the way it resonated: this was a hex. It was blasphemy. It sounded like a pot boiling and bubbling with all the world's negative emotions—hatred, resentment, anger, contempt, mockery...

It was a Taboo Word, a type of Word which good sorcerers kept sealed away in the recesses of libraries, concealed from the eyes, and which they treated as strictly outside their fields of study. They were cursed Words that could make air and water go bad, earth parch, and fire weaken and die.

Something was there, speaking that which should never be spoken.

I approached it slowly, remaining alert to my surroundings. With the art of Waterwalk, my feet floated above the poisonous bog and created ripples on its surface as I moved.

The demon standing atop the enormous altar, its arms spread wide as it recited Words, looked like a person, for the most part. It had a burly, muscular body that was covered with hair, and a rugged face that looked as though it had

been roughly chiseled out of a rock wall. The strangest thing about it, however, was the huge pair of antlers that were growing from its head; they reminded me of a moose. The demon looked at us, and its recitation slowed to a stop.

“What happened to the gatekeepers?” it asked in fluent Western Common Speech.

“What do you think?” Menel asked back.

Seeing the longsword in Menel’s hands, the horned demon nodded and hummed in understanding.

I was growing increasingly tense.

“I see. If I’m not mistaken... you are Sir William, the Faraway Paladin. And you are Meneldor, of Swift Wings.”

He had intelligence and the ability to gather and process information. This demon was in a completely different class than those that were ranked Soldier or Commander.

“A General...” I muttered. “It’s a horned wilderdemon... a cernunnos.”

The wilderdemon heard me and grinned. “So two noble warriors are here... This will speed things along.”

The moment he said it, I sensed things rising all around us. Menel and I had both been roughly aware of their presence, but all the same, this was an ambush. Bizarrely shaped demons appeared from the shadows of the tree’s enormous roots. Some were a cross between a buck and a bull, while others were snake-lizard hybrids.

“They must die here,” the wilderdemon said. Following his words, the other demons prepared to attack.

“Menel, is this distance okay?”

“More than enough. Back me up.”

Menel slowly touched one of the Lord of Holly’s blackened roots. “Lord of Holly, half of the Twins and he who rules the woods from the summer to the winter solstice...”

An oak-leaf pattern had formed on the back of Menel's pale white hand. With both his hands on the root and his eyes closed, Menel looked almost like a priest in the middle of prayer. Realizing something, the cernunnos tried to give an order to the demons, but it was too late.

"Thy Twin, the Lord of Oak, entrusted me with this..."

A mysterious power flowed from his hand into the root. Although it had blackened and lost its strength, the root now began to hear a pulse, almost like a heartbeat, from the trunk of the old tree.

"The power that makes a lord a lord. I bestow it now upon thee."

The ground shook and slowly, the roots of the old tree began to move. They ensnared the terrible demons and dragged them into the bog. Squelching sounds and the screams of demons echoed for a while, and then there was silence.

"You pests... So the Lord of Oak was already yours..." The cernunnos had been watching over this from atop the altar. He was quick at regaining his composure; he'd already contained the anger and unease I'd seen on his face for just an instant. "But unless you defeat me, it all amounts to the same."

The cernunnos muttered a Word, and a halberd formed in his hands. He stood ready for battle.

"I will," I replied. "For the sake of these woods—" I drew a breath, then held my spear at the ready as I spoke the next words. "—I swear it on the flame of Gracefeel, goddess of eternal flux!"

I charged headlong towards him.



A roar filled the air. The halberd smashed against a corner of the altar, sending countless shards of stone flying towards me. I knocked them away with my shield by reflex, defending myself and Menel, who was behind me.

Right now, Menel was in the middle of transferring the sovereignty of the woods to the Lord of Holly after having received it from the Lord of Oak. He wasn't completely defenseless, but he was very vulnerable, and there was

nothing he could do about it.

“Flame, repel the darkness!” I offered a prayer, constructing a shining barrier around Menel. This cernunnos was a strong enemy. If he suddenly turned his attacks on Menel during the battle, it was possible that I might not be able to fully protect him.

I’d given up the initiative to erect that shield. Intending to take advantage, the cernunnos’s decision was to incant a Word.

“De fumo ad fla—”

But that was a bad move.

“Tacere, os!!”

My words, uttered with the best timing I could manage, shut the cernunnos’s mouth tight. The next moment, there was a deep boom, and an angry storm of toxic smoke and furious fire erupted around the cernunnos with a force that could have been mistaken for an explosion. Its Word had misfired, just as I’d intended it to.

— *The single best opportunity to kill a powerful sorcerer is when that sorcerer casts a large spell.*

That was what Gus had taught me. Long incantations were not something to do unless you were confident you could recite them in their entirety.

But it seemed that my opponent had been anticipating this move as well.

As the smoke spread to the left and right, I chose the right and ran towards the cernunnos, thrusting my spear into the fog. There was the high-pitched squeal of metal grating on metal. The halberd and the spear caught on each other, and groaned under each other’s pressure.

“Hmm. You switched instantly from concentrating on prayer to discerning the nature of my Word and interrupting. Very good, very good.”

There was a gust of wind, and the smoke dissipated. I frowned; I couldn’t see any obvious wounds on the cernunnos at all.

He probably had an almost complete resistance to poison and fire, or maybe all magical phenomena. I guessed that the reason he’d been able to incant

without hesitation was because he knew there would be no problem even if it backfired on him. If he could speak the whole thing, so much the better; but it would serve as a smokescreen even if he couldn't. It was a no-lose decision, and he had ended up using the smoke to draw even closer.

He knew he had an extremely powerful resistance, and he knew that I was a user of blessings and magic. He had read the situation well; it was no wonder he was so composed. It was probably fair to call him a strong opponent. But I had ways to deal with strong opponents, too.

With an aggressive shout, I put strength into my arms, trying to force the halberd down. Taken by surprise, the cernunnos grunted and resisted with his own strength.

If he had a resistance to magic, I merely needed to settle this in close combat. The strike of a blade had proven effective even against the demons' High King that Blood and his allies had once fought. I couldn't imagine that there was any demon with greater defense than that. This demon had a physical body like any other, and that meant that some kind of physical attack would probably work on him, whether that was cutting, thrusting, or striking.

Our clashing weapons came violently apart, we both leaped backwards, and then a furious battle started, the two of us running along the tops of roots as wide as roads as we exchanged attacks. Our positions swapped and shifted at dizzying speed and attacks came from all directions, sometimes even from above or below, before we collided face-to-face once more with a crash of metal on metal louder than anything before it.

The spear and the halberd interlocked, twisted, and groaned as both of us tried to force the other's weapon down. Veins stood out on the cernunnos's thick arms, and its muscles bulged. I got myself into a solid stance, grit my teeth, pressed down with greater force, and gradually, my spear began to overpower the halberd.

"A-Are you *human*?!" The color was draining from the cernunnos's face.

I thought that was a horrible question. These were nothing more than the results of my training.

Breathing out slowly, I pushed even harder. The cernunnos let out a

desperate roar, and tried suddenly applying his strength in another direction and using footwork to shift his body around. As he tried to mask his inadequacy in strength with these moves, I pushed ever harder, relying only on my muscles.

He probably didn't have much experience with being overpowered in a straight-out contest of strength, and I wasn't going to be beaten by little gimmicks like this from someone whose inexperience and uncertainty was plain to see. I used my trained muscles to push and push until I was totally in control.

Now was the time to use technique.

I shouted and yanked the spear in a different direction. The spear sprang upwards, and its blade connected directly with the wilderdemon's enormous antlers, exactly as I'd intended. A look of shock spread over its face. I deliberately didn't apply enough power to crush them; instead, I smacked the end of its long, moose-like antlers upwards.

Now then... if there were a pair of long antlers growing out of the head of a humanoid creature, and the end of those antlers were to be violently forced upwards, what would happen to the creature's neck?

"Ghk—"

The answer: it would bend and twist very easily. It was simple physics, and there was very little the cernunnos could do about it.

I caught the blade in its antlers and tugged the wilderdemon towards me. It stumbled wildly. Because it was being dragged around by the antlers, its neck was being wrenched about, and it couldn't keep its balance.

There is a close connection between your sense of balance and the angle of your neck, which is why it suddenly becomes difficult to balance on one foot when you're looking directly upwards. All that considered, no experiments would be necessary to answer whether a person could keep their balance while having their neck *forcibly twisted*.

I dragged the demon to the ground and flowed into a downward swing of the spear. A spear wasn't just a stabbing weapon; the handle I held in my hand was over two meters long and made to withstand full-force collisions. If I swung it down with all my might, that strength and its centrifugal force would come

together to make my spear nothing less than an absolutely brutal blunt instrument.

I slammed it down. I heard, and felt, the demon's antlers and skull break. A roar of pain rang through the forest.

Even then, the cernunnos made a frenzied attempt to fight back—it was a General, after all—but that resistance was very short-lived.



By the time I'd made sure the wilderdemon had turned to ash, and claimed the halberd left behind, Menel had already completed his work.

"Phew."

I hadn't noticed because I'd been incredibly preoccupied, but he looked exhausted. His silver hair was dull with dirt, and unless I was seeing things, even his cheeks looked a little sunken. Menel had been the one with the most exhausting job this time around, so it was probably only natural.

All this had started on the day of the summer solstice, when snowdrops had blossomed out of season. By the time a few days had passed, a completely peculiar situation had developed, where all the fruit was overripe and falling rotten off the trees, and the trees were growing rapidly and dying at random, and eventually, even the wild animals and the fairies were going mad and wreaking havoc.

Menel was quick to notice something was wrong, and told me with a sour look on his face that the woods were being thrown out of kilter. Since we happened to be stopping in Whitesails at the time, His Excellency Ethel asked us to resolve the situation, and we accepted. And where we headed was the domain of the Lord of Oak.

According to Menel, the woods in the area were ruled from the winter solstice to the summer solstice by the Lord of Oak, and from the summer to the winter by the Lord of Holly.

He told me that on the winter solstice, the day that marks the return to spring when the sun recovers its shine, the Lord of Oak takes over sovereignty from the Lord of Holly. Then the sun rises and sets, and when it reaches the summer

solstice, when all its best days are over, the Lord of Oak hands its sovereignty back to the Lord of Holly once more.

As he described it, it was the relationship between the two great and ancient Twins, also referred to as the Fraternal Kings, that maintained the cycle of nature in these woods. That was why we'd headed to see the Lord of Oak. The natural order of the woods had gone wrong the moment the summer solstice passed, so Menel had reasoned that the Lord of Oak must not have handed over the sovereignty for some reason, or perhaps was in a state where he *couldn't* hand it over.

But that turned out not to be the case. In the woods' other domain, the incarnation of the Lord of Oak appeared before us and told us that the problem was the Lord of *Holly*, who was in a state where he couldn't accept sovereignty over the woods. Because of this, the Lord of Oak said, the sovereignty had remained with him for too many cycles of the sun and moon, and many abnormalities were starting to occur in the woods.

The sovereignty the Twins possessed was a powerful thing and would bring only harm unless it was passed into the proper hands at the proper time. It would not be long before the forest suffered a critical failure that would damage it so badly that it would be unable to fully recover for a good many years.

I asked if there was any way to surrender the sovereignty, and the Lord of Oak answered that it could not be relinquished unless someone showed himself strong enough to be fit to receive it, as the Lord of Holly had for him and as he had for the Lord of Holly. His voice sounded as if he had given up on everything and accepted his doom.

"Then leave it to me," Menel said vehemently. "Great Lord of Oak, please, entrust your sovereignty to me."

But the incarnation of the Lord of Oak told him it was impossible. Perhaps it could have been done, he said, if Menel was one of the earliest generation of elves created by the god of the fae Rhea Silvia herself; but as he was, with his half-human blood, he wouldn't last more than a month bearing the burden of the sovereignty of the woods.

“If I can last a whole entire month, we’re good. We two’ll solve the rest.”

The Lord of Oak was silent for a while, and then said, “But if the Lord of Holly is already lost, your soul will come to ruin after a month.”

“Ya, I guess it will.”

“Why would you go so far?”

“Because I swore to atone for my sins and live a positive, forward-looking life.” There wasn’t a hint of embarrassment in Menel’s voice as he told this to the lord of the woods. “That was the vow I made to a great god through my friend, who rescued the soul of someone I owed a lot to. That’s it, no other reason.”

The Lord of Oak fell quiet again. After a long silence, Menel’s self-imposed challenge earned his approval, and he declared that he would set a trial for Menel.

“This trial is a secret rite of the woods. You—strong warrior, wielder of magic, agent of the god of the flame—you have no right to join him.”

“I understand that,” I said. Menel and I looked at each other; I nodded to him, then turned back to the Lord of Oak and said, “I’ll wait. Right here, for as many days as it takes.”

“I’m not gonna take that long, brother.” Menel laughed and told me to quit worrying. Then he and the incarnation of the Lord of Oak left me behind and headed into the depths of the lord’s domain.

I never found out what happened in there, how much hardship Menel had to endure, or what he had to overcome. But after I had waited patiently for one night, he came back the following morning with a face full of fatigue, but smiling proudly in spite of it.

After that, we immediately headed for the domain of the Lord of Holly.

The rest of the journey proceeded wonderfully swiftly. Now that Menel had received sovereignty over the woods, not a single tree or bush obstructed his path. We discovered demons in the Lord of Holly’s domain, destroyed them, and that was everything up to the present moment.

“...”

I was kind of getting the feeling that problems caused by demons were on the rise again around here recently.

There were some that we'd handled ourselves, and others that we'd just heard reports of from other adventurers after they'd solved the issue independently. They were all kinds of different incidents, really, but... now that things had escalated to demons capable of breaching the domain of a forest lord and laying a curse upon it, I felt that things were getting a little bit serious.

As I wondered what was behind all of this, my mind was filled with a hazy sense of anxiety difficult to put into words. It was like I was overlooking something, but I had no idea what.

My thoughts were interrupted by a voice.

“You, children of men.”



I looked to see another person's figure at the altar. Wait, was it actually a person? People didn't have skin like bark, and they certainly didn't have plant leaves and ivy in place of scalp and facial hair. But both Menel and I had a familiarity with this figure's appearance; the incarnation of the Lord of Oak had looked very similar.

“I am the Lord of Holly,” said the incarnation in a gentle tone. “Truly I thank you and commend you for your valor in removing those brazen invaders, and for your bravery in traveling to this domain to transfer the sovereignty. But first, I must restore order to these woods. A moment, if you will.”

The lord's incarnation spread his arms. A recitation I couldn't understand spun fluidly from his mouth. This Word was probably another of the woods' secrets, and might even have been completely unknown to humans.

A short while after he began reciting, the ground gradually began to rumble. Tremors emanating from the old tree known as the Lord of Holly could be felt through the whole domain. They continued for a while, and then gradually settled. The moment they could no longer be felt, the change occurred.

Jets of clean water spurted one after another from the toxic bog that surrounded us. Menel could have done something similar when he had been in possession of the sovereignty, but not on anywhere near this scale. The poison was washed away with the force of a tsunami, and in no time at all, it had been diluted to nothing.

Many trees had succumbed to the cursed poison and withered, some falling down tragically and others dying upright; but now, life sprouted from them and grew before my eyes, becoming seedlings, then saplings, then adult trees, and blossoming with all the flowers of summer. A fresh scent drove out the foul odor. Plants, flowers, and mushrooms began to spring up around the trees. The life of the woods returned to the poison-damaged earth. Leaves grew, the wind danced, and glittering beams of sunlight shone through the trees.

“Wow...” Like watching a film being played in reverse, it was a sight of rebirth that shook the soul. Even Menel was captivated by it. “Lord of the Woods, huh. He’s using that crazy power like it’s a natural extension of his body...”

Menel had groaned with pain every night while the sovereignty had been with him. Even though he hardly even used its power, the simple act of holding it within his body had caused him such great pain that even my benediction couldn’t ease it.

Menel shrugged a little, accepting this as the difference between a person and a Lord of the Woods. But then the Lord of Holly spoke, having now completed his recitation in its entirety. “This is thy future also, child of man and fae.”

Those words seemed to stun Menel. Finally, he said, “What?”

“The sovereignty of the woods dwelt in thy body for a time. Gone though it now may be, the blood and power of man and fae already flowing in thee have begun to incline to the fae and steadily become more fit for a Lord of the Woods.”

“Huh?” I froze in surprise as well.

“Worry not. The change is not immediate.”

Easier said than done, I thought... and Menel still looked frozen.

“Umm... What’s going to happen to him?” I asked.

The Lord of Holly answered, but to Menel. “If thou dost not neglect thy training, thou wilt live far longer than a century, and thereafter become a new Lord of the Woods.”

At about that point, Menel finally started working again. “Ohh... ohh, uh...” Menel clapped a hand to his forehead as if he were fishing up some old memory. “Now that you mention it, back in my old home, I heard the oldest of the elves talking about this once. Elves acknowledged by a forest lord form a contract with him, and when their life draws to an end, they go into the forest before passing away. Their body becomes a wild animal, or a boulder, or a tree...”

And their soul became a lord who ruled over the forest.

“Yes. Thou madest such a contract with my brother, the Lord of Oak.”

“That’s not what I thought I was doing.”

“Be that as it may, such is signified by thy acceptance of the woods’ sovereignty, sapling.”

“Can I refuse?”

“It is possible. Thou could die as a human, were that thy desire.”

“I see...”

“Think not of it now, but the time shall come.”

Menel nodded, his jade eyes remaining firmly fixed on the Lord of the Woods. His expression was serious.

“And to thou, human child, disciple of the flame. There is something I must tell thee.” The Lord of Holly turned his gaze to me. “Thou surely knowest of the mountain range to the west, rich in reddish-brown stone.”

“Do you mean... the Rust Mountains?”

Their color was said to come from large deposits of red iron ore.

“Indeed.”

The lord’s incarnation nodded and opened its mouth. What followed was a

fluid and foreboding stream of words.

“In a future not far off for you men, the fire of dark disaster shall catch in the mountains of rust. That fire shall spread, and this land may all be consumed.”

“Uh...”

“The wilderdemon also came from those mountains of rust. That land is now a den of demons, wherein the great lord of miasma and wicked flame slumbereth upon the mountain people’s gold. Fightest or acceptest thou this future, be thou ready, for that day shall not be long in coming.” The words spoken from the mouth of the Lord of Holly echoed with the weight of a prophecy around the forest domain.

“Aren’t *you* gonna do anything about it?” Menel asked him pointedly.

However, the Lord of Holly’s reply was blunt. “If I am to perish, that too is fate.”

He seemed to be passive by nature. The Lord of Oak had been the same.

“To us, the fire of destruction leads to rebirth. Humans may again disappear from this continent, demons may flourish, the lord of wicked fire may roar as he will. It is no matter; the woods will live on.”

All around, newly grown trees that had sprouted from those that had fallen waved in the breeze. Nothing more needed to be said.

“Therefore, child of man, sapling: this is a warning, and also my duty.”

It was his duty to us, who had righted the problems with the sovereignty and fought for no reward.

“I promise you a bountiful harvest this autumn.”

With that, the incarnation of the Lord of Holly disappeared.



“Lord of the Woods. God...”

The two of us talked as we walked back.

When we traveled through the forest, Menel would normally use his elemental techniques to get the trees to open a path for us, but the routes he

took now were... more than that. He ducked behind trees and between large boulders, taking me along trails with unreal scenery and cavorting fairies glittering gold.

“This way.”

“A-Are you sure?”

“No sweat. I can tell. Uh, I’ve become able to tell.”

On the boundary between the invisible world inhabited by those not human and the transient world in which we spent our lives were the fairy trails. They were a mystery of the woods, and any ordinary person who became lost and wandered into them would face the consequences. Menel passed through these trails one after another as if they were simple shortcuts.

The air was cool, and it felt like the wind itself was sparkling. Night and day traded places at a dizzying pace. The leaves of the trees, wriggling like living creatures, were even more vibrant and richer in color than during the season of new green leaves. And when darkness fell, it was deeper than any night in the transient world. The glittering fairies blinked on and off in the jet-blackness as they laughed together and fluttered from place to place.

I couldn’t deny that the sight was fantastic, but...

“If I lose sight of you, I’m going to be in big trouble...”

From all over, I could hear the sweet yet ominous laughter of the fairies. Not all of the laughs I could hear were welcoming; some were laughs intended to threaten the foreign humans, others the kind of insulting and mocking laughs that might feature in disturbing fairy tales. It was scary.

An unusually powerful concentration of mana was swirling around. My skin was tingling the same way it did when I used a powerful Word. I swallowed.

“Don’t worry, I’m not gonna lose sight of you. Even if you do get lost, I can search you out and pull you back in.”

“I didn’t know you could do that...”

“Can now, yeah. Not too happy about it, to be honest.”

It seemed that having once had the sovereignty dwelling inside him, its effects

were still lingering. He'd been a talented elementalist in the first place, and now he had climbed a few rungs higher still—or maybe I should say he had been forcibly pulled up.

“I was planning on getting there on my own,” Menel muttered. It sounded like things were complicated. “Eh, whatever. Power’s power, whether it’s handed to me or not. I’ve just gotta get used to it and make it my own. Same thing in the end.”

As always, Menel was very swift to accept and adapt. He must have been thinking that power was power, whether you were given it or developed it yourself, and the only question was whether you could wield it effectively when you wanted to.

“Well, stuff like powers, I can go through and test out one by one. The real question is the whole ‘becoming a forest lord’ thing. What’s your view on that, Will?”

“It’s pretty incredible, but it’s such an overwhelming thing to imagine I don’t really know what to think, I guess.”

“I know what you mean.”

I couldn’t see anything particularly different about Menel’s profile as he walked alongside me. Just like usual, he was walking at a fixed pace while occasionally glancing around to make sure nothing was out of the ordinary. “Longer than a century, as the Lord of Holly put it... We’re talking about after my life runs out in two, three hundred years, maybe even further in the future than that... a world that far in the future.”

I found it very hard to imagine. “I’ll be dead by then.”

“Yeah.” Menel nodded. “I’ll keep watch over your grave, see how the lives of your kids and your grandkids play out... Well, I guess I’ll be pretty settled by then, come to think of it.”

“You were planning to do all that...”

“Damn right I was. You’ve done way too much for me.” He didn’t even hesitate.

I had no idea how to respond to something like that. But I could tell he was serious, so I just nodded solemnly and didn't make a joke out of it.

"But yeah... After all that's over, maybe becoming one with the mountains and the woods wouldn't be a bad way to live."

I kept quiet and listened to him muse.

"Half-elves have to choose one or the other eventually. The elves' way of life, existing in the woods, living eternally with the water and the soil as something like the fae; or the humans' way of life, burning bright as a roaring fire, and vanishing with the wind."

Menel said that choosing was the fate of all who were born between two races like that.

"I'll disappear into the forest, become an old tree like those ones, see where the things you're gonna have achieved end up. Then, I'll slowly wither and fall, and return to the great circle. Sounds good to me." He laughed. "You said 'only in dying is there life' before, right, in one of your sermon things? You know, that one where you were really uncomfortable and awkward."

"What?! That's so mean, I did my best! But yes, I did say that."

"Life's long, so the way I was thinking of it, I'd just collapse and die someday and that'd be that. I didn't really feel it before, but I'm finally sort of getting what you meant."

Life always comes back to death in the end. So starting to think about "how you want to die" inevitably comes back to "how you want to live."

"I want to see where your achievements end up. And to do that, I'll even change the way I live my life if I have to." He gave me an awkward smile. It made my chest tighten.

"I might not be able to do anything that big, you know."

"You kidding?" Menel couldn't help a small laugh and a shrug. "What do you think you've done since you met me? You killed a wyvern barehanded, you killed a chimera, you're all the rage with the troubadours, with several adventure stories to your name, and just now you hunted down a General-class

demon and beat it one on one. You've made legends *already*. And I'll bet you're gonna have that same vacant look on your face when you make some more."

He slapped my back roughly.

"I'll fight beside you, and if I survive all the way to the end, I'll wrap things up by vanishing into the depths of the woods. Of course, I'll make sure to say something awesome and memorable before I disappear."

"You'll become legend."

"Both of us will. Not bad, huh?"

"Yeah."

That sounded like it might be a fun blueprint for the future. It was, of course, always possible that one of us would die in battle, and if it came to that, I didn't know which of us would pass away first; but if we survived, I would definitely pass away before Menel. There was no way around that.

The thought felt kind of lonely, and I started to feel sorry for having to leave him. But if he could smile like that as he imagined the future, as things went, that had to be "not bad."

"Say, Will. How do you wanna go?"

"Well, I'm not as decided on that as you."

Menel's eyes went a little wide as if he found that surprising. "Knowing you, I thought you'd have it all planned out."

"The thing is..." I sighed heavily. "I do think about it, but everything just changes so *fast*!" I shouted it out in frustration. "I left my home, right, and the next thing I know I'm a paladin! And I blink again and I'm a feudal lord with everyone supporting me! And apparently Bee's songs have reached the continent to the north too now... At this pace, there's no *way* I can imagine where I'm gonna be in ten years' time!"

Menel burst out laughing. "Human lives are short and intense, but *you* really take that to an extreme. I guess that's a hero's fate."

"I'll take being a hero if I have to. I just wish I could draw up a proper plan for my life..."

“A hero who plans out his life? That’s so unfitting it’s kind of funny.”

“So mean!”

We made jabs at each other for a while and laughed together. Then, unexpectedly, Menel stopped walking. As if checking something, he stared at the space between two trees, where there was nothing except total darkness.

“Here it is.” The silver-haired half-elf reached between the trees. When he did, they receded, as if giving way to him. Then the space shimmered, like the surface of water, or the air in scorching heat, and wind blew through.

Led by Menel, I took a single step forward into the shimmering space. For an instant, I felt a strange sensation similar to resurfacing after being underwater, and then, all at once, my field of vision widened.

“Huh...?”

There were no trees around me in either direction, and there was no gloom or darkness. I looked up and saw that bright sunlight was pouring down from the summer sun hanging in the middle of the sky. The summer sky was clear overhead, with cumulonimbus clouds far in the distance. I lowered my gaze. The road snaked gently off to the horizon, and on both sides was a series of partitioned fields, creating a patchwork of beautiful, natural colors. A gust of wind blew, and the vast fields of wheat swayed.

“Wait. This... is...”

No way.

“We’re out of Beast Woods. This is Wheat Road.”

“In *one day*?!”

I looked around as I said it, but this was definitely the Wheat Road I was familiar with. But that domain was in the deepest part of the woods. It was dozens of kilometers through the woods as the crow flies—maybe hundreds, I had no idea—and we’d traveled that rough road in a single day?

“That’s what a Fairy Trail is. It’s not like we can go *anywhere* with it, though. Just the places I know.”

“If you could, you’d be a weapon of war. Wow... the woods’ secrets are

scary.”

I remembered what Blood had taught me: Never get in a fight with an elf in a forest.

Then, after taking one more step forward, I suddenly realized. “Isn’t this where I met you, and where we came out of the woods with Bee and Tonio, too?”

“Yeah, it is.”

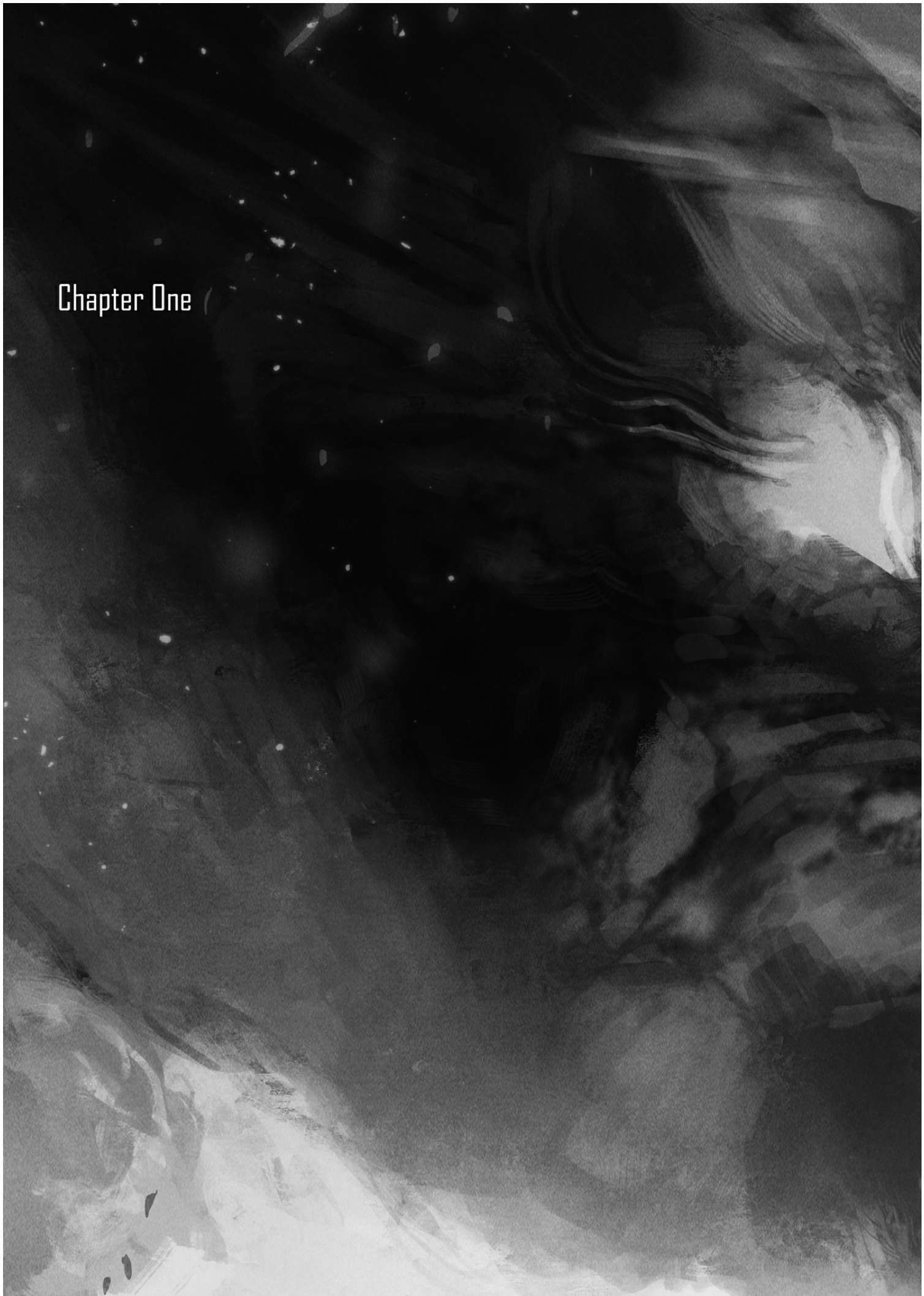
There was a rush of wind. I heard the ears of wheat rustling in the field.

“It’s already been two years since we met, huh...”

I’d set off from the city of the dead, made friends, toppled a wyvern, become a paladin, and defeated demons and a chimera, and my efforts hadn’t ended there, either. Long and yet short, it had been a whirlwind period of my life.

By the solstice system, I was seventeen.

Chapter One



The wisteria hanging from the pergola swayed in the breeze. We were in the courtyard of the lord's mansion at the center of Whitesails, the city that was the gateway to the continent of Southmark. Flowers of bright colors blossomed in full glory under the mansion's windows, surrounded by the brilliant white of its walls.

"Thank you very much for your trouble." Under an arbor in the courtyard, His Excellency Ethelbald, Duke of Southmark and feudal lord of Whitesails, spoke to us in a solemn tone. The gentle sunlight of early morning surrounded us. "I expect you're getting tired of hearing that from me," he added, a smile crossing his face as his expression relaxed.

I wasn't very good at coming up with witty responses, so while I was still thinking of what to say, Menel replied casually, "You got that right. Sending us to work every time something comes up..."

"That would be because the paladin is my retainer, after a manner at least."



“And what about me, who isn’t your retainer? You’ve got me running around doing work for you as well, here.”

“If I mobilize Sir William, I get a second hero tagging along for free. Truly good value.”

“I’m not a freebie you got at some street stall.”

“But you *are* the dear friend of the paladin.” Another response shot back. “Just as a friend fights for his friend, so a knight fights for the people and his liege. Am I wrong?”

“Service, devotion, fealty... Sure, they sound attractive, but what’s the reality like? If you put too much burden on someone, he’s gonna grow unhappy with you. And once you start to suspect he resents you deep down, it’ll be hard to count on him when it really matters. Isn’t that how things work? I wonder what’s gonna happen when you have to go up against something scary without *this* hero to help you.” Menel pointed at me with an exaggerated motion.

Menel had no direct allegiance to Ethel, and he had nerve and no restraint. He would be frank with anyone, even a member of the royal family.

I couldn’t remember clearly what had gotten Ethel and Menel talking, but conversation between the two of them had become more frequent at some point during the past two years, and now they spoke quite a lot.

“Heheh. Indeed, indeed, the thought of my paladin running off is certainly scary. In that case, I had better keep him well compensated to make sure I keep him, hadn’t I?”

“Yeah, see, exactly. That kind of attitude’s important. Then this guy can feel good about showing you loyalty.”

Ethel laughed graciously. It looked like he was quite enjoying his exchange with Menel. That aside, I was coming to the frightening realization that some haggling about how I should be compensated had apparently been occurring just under the surface of their discussion. By the time I became aware of it, the flow of the conversation had already shifted to me receiving a reward.

“I shall see that money and items of your request are sent to you later. Now

then, that aside, Sir William...”

“Y-Yes, what is it?”

“I have something I want to talk to you about. I would like you to give me Meneldor here.”

“Huh?”

From Ethel’s face alone, it was plain to see that he was serious, and his solemn tone removed all doubt.

“He is a skilled elementalist and a spectacular hunter. And not just that—he is a half-elf, slow to age, and he has no reservations about speaking his mind. I want him. I dearly want him!” The duke sounded like he was greatly enjoying himself.

I gave a half-laugh, half-sigh as I thought about what to say. “Your Excellency, Menel is not an object. As much as you say you want him, he is not mine to give.” I paused. “If he were to say he’d like to serve Your Excellency, then that would be another matter, but—”

“I serve no one,” Menel said, interrupting. “Like hell I’m gonna be bartered around like some dog or cat.”

Although Ethel had been demoted to commoner status, he was a member of the royal family. But this made no difference to Menel, who flatly rejected his offer, closing his jade eyes and waving a hand in front of his face to show he wasn’t remotely interested.

Ethel sighed upon seeing Menel’s reaction. “Dear, dear. What a shame. I can never have enough talented people, you see.”

The Duke of Southmark was from the northern continent of Grassland. Brother to the King of the Fertile Kingdom, he was in charge of expanding the kingdom into Southmark. He probably had a lot of difficult things to deal with and was always short of people and resources.

“I just need one more ship, I just need one more trustworthy, competent official... I am sure you too must have thoughts like these.”

“Yes. Especially recently... I’ve started to understand what that feels like.”

After being pushed into the position of lord of the region of Beast Woods and doing all kinds of work to develop the area, I'd developed a close familiarity with that kind of difficulty.

"I see. How is the river port?" asked Ethel.

"Fortunately, it's going okay with everyone's help, but there are a few issues..."

"Hm. Let's hear them. Perhaps I can give you some advice."

"Not very generous of you," Menel said. "Only advice?"

"Material support as well. That is, if you are willing to take it in place of the reward I mentioned earlier..."

"Tch."

The two of them smirked at each other. Then, from the entrance to the courtyard, I heard gravel being stepped on and the sound of heavy breathing.

Walking towards us while wiping copious amounts of sweat off his face was Bishop Bart Bagley, the man in charge of the main temple of Whitesails. He had a portly body and was wearing loosely fitting priest's robes with gold and silver thread woven in. His movements exuded impatience, and he had a sternness to his expression that came from his quick-to-anger personality and the stress of his daily responsibilities.

As usual, he was a person who, to put it politely, did not impart all that positive an impression—but even so, I respected him.

He stopped in front of the arbor, gave a bow to Ethel, and then turned his gaze on Menel and me and gave us a long, searching stare. "Hmph. Returned victorious, I gather. I was expecting all the flattery from people calling you a hero and a peerless, brave warrior to have gone to your head and earned you a crushing defeat or two by now."

I bowed to him. It was because he was someone who would speak like that to me that I continued to respect him as much as I did. I returned a full smile to him. He blasted air out of his nose and turned the other way.

As Ethel watched us, he let out a chuckle and said, "Thank you for coming,

Bagley.” Then he composed himself, and his serious face was back. “Well then, let us hear your report of the incident.”



“The fire of dark disaster shall catch in the mountains of rust. That fire shall spread, and this land may all be consumed.”

After we finished giving our account of the incident and the killing of the demon responsible, we then began to speak of the prophecy. Silence immediately descended upon the table under the arbor. Not reporting it hadn’t been an option.

“Those were the words the Lord of Holly used.”

“The Lord of the Woods said that...” His Excellency grumbled to himself and massaged his temples. “Beasts, then demons, and no sooner had I begun to think things had settled down than we face the unidentified threats of a ‘fire of disaster’ and ‘lord of miasma and wicked flame.’ The story I heard from you in the past, of the demons’ High King sealed in a city of the dead, also concerns me. The trouble never ceases, it seems. Good heavens, this continent. It never bores.”

I could sense considerable tiredness in him. Since becoming a paladin, I’d seen him forced to do a lot of work responding to demon plots, damage caused by beasts big and small, and all kinds of other things. He provided aid to settlements that had suffered real damage from attacks. He negotiated with the mainland to coax aid out of them. He had knights patrol areas to prevent damage before it happened. He employed adventurers on a temporary basis to hunt down and kill the causes of these problems. He took care of the documents necessary to carry out all of that. He actually traveled to the affected areas and provided consolation and on-site instruction. And of course, he couldn’t neglect normal city governance, either. I had never seen Ethel relaxing and enjoying a break.

Out of consideration for the duke, the bishop asked in his place. “Hunter, what level of power does this Lord of the Woods have? Can his so-called prophecy be trusted?”

“I have a name, old man.”

“As do I, boy.”

The two of them glared at each other and tutted. These two did not get on very well.

“U-Um, both of you, try to get along...”

“Hmph. Get along with this lout? You must be joking.”

Menel snorted. “You got that right. I hate self-important guys like him.”

The two of them openly displayed their displeasure of one another, Bishop Bagley by crossing his arms and looking down on Menel, and Menel by resting his chin on his hand and drawing his eyebrows together. It felt really uncomfortable that my friend and the person I respected hated each other’s guts so much.

As I wrung my hands, Ethel smiled brightly at the pair. “But I’m sure you’d both agree that as a business partner, the other is more than suitable, yes?”

“Well, indeed. I am not ignorant of his talents.”

“Wouldn’t even be in the same room as him otherwise.”

Neither of them sounded happy about it. His Excellency glanced in my direction and winked.

“Fine, whatever,” Menel said. “This is business. I’ll answer. Have a look at this.” He took a map out of the leather bag he’d been carrying and spread it out on the desk. We had obtained this map from Tonio, a merchant we were on friendly terms with. It was a detailed, pretty carefully crafted map of this area as it had been during the Union Age. Being two hundred years old, the map had changed quite a lot, and it was covered from corner to corner in Menel’s corrections.

He traced a finger across it as we all peered over. “So, first off, when I say ‘Lord of the Woods’—there are leylines around there which are like conduits for the mana in the earth.” He drew several invisible lines with his finger, probably representing the leylines, and then pointed at the spot where many of them crossed. “Where they meet, you have a Domain, and ‘Lord of the Woods’ refers to its lord. As for what a lord actually is, it varies. It can be a great fae dwelling

in a tree or a boulder, an old wild animal that had its den in the Domain for a long time and gained intelligence, or a bunch of other things.”

Pausing for breath, Menel brushed his silver hair back behind his ear. “Not only do they live far longer than one or two hundred years, they’re directly connected to the leylines. They store up a lot of memories and knowledge, and are constantly drawing mana into their bodies from all the areas the leylines connect them to. The lord is the woods’ heart, its brain.”

This world was made up of Words. When the trees rustled, or sunlight filtered through the trees leaving patches of light and shadow, a skilled sorcerer could pick out faint Words from the fluctuation in mana and interpret them.

Of course, there was a limit to how much information a sorcerer could read from something like that. Even magic users as great as Gus, who had raised me with Blood and Mary and was known as the Wandering Sage, couldn’t learn all there was to learn just by listening to the rustling of trees. But Gus had also told me that was because we humans read Words within the framework of human thought. If it was a being much closer to Nature, then...

“The Lord of the Woods isn’t as powerful as the gods, who can even read the unwritten future to an extent, but... if this is coming from him, you can bet there’s a damn solid basis behind it.” Menel’s tone was firm. “It’s less a prophecy and more, uh, an educated prediction.”

Bishop Bagley hummed quietly. “It appears necessary to prioritize this matter, Your Excellency.”

“Yes. The Rust Mountains... Fallen capital of the dwarves, and a den of demons...”

Everyone under the shade of the arbor had a serious expression. It wasn’t surprising. There had been nothing but trouble recently, including many incidents not worth an explicit mention, and now, on top of it all, we had to contend with a ‘fire of disaster’ that would come from a den of demons. It would depress anyone.

So I decided to laugh.

“Sounds great!”

The three of them turned to look at me. I did my best to put on a huge grin.

“I can go as wild as I like!”

If you got ripped, you could solve pretty much everything by force. Blood gave very good advice. “We know the location of the problem, and even better, it’s in enemy territory, desolate to the point that there’s no risk at all of me hurting any bystanders! This problem was *made* for me!”

I clenched a fist as I said it, and Ethel couldn’t help but laugh. “Come to think of it, you’re right. Can I trust you with this, then, paladin?”

“Of course!”

Bishop Bagley and Menel both sighed at once and automatically glanced at one another, then snorted and looked away again.

“Give the word, and I’ll gather some men and head out at once—”

Ethel chuckled at my eagerness. “No, I doubt there’s a need to rush it that much.”

I nodded. I’d suggested it energetically on purpose to help clear away the gloom, but actually I was of the same opinion.

Everyone here was a quick thinker, so I was sure they’d all realized as well: regarding the “fire of disaster,” the Lord of Holly had said that “it shall not be long in coming,” but he had also promised us “a bountiful harvest” for the autumn. That meant that unless something happened that the Lord of the Woods didn’t foresee, we could safely assume that nothing would happen until autumn at least.

“I’m afraid that we don’t know very much regarding the Rust Mountains, either,” Ethel said. “Can I also ask you to gather information?”

“Yes,” I replied. “I will try asking my friend who’s a troubadour and the dwarves who live at the port. As for the prophecy from the Lord of the Woods, we should keep it a secret between all of us here for the time being.”

Everyone nodded, as if to say they’d already been planning on it. The period from the summer to the autumn was the busiest time of year for the farmers, who made up the majority of the population. The summer wheat harvest

wasn't yet over, and they had a lot ahead of them once autumn came around: planting winter wheat, fattening up their livestock with nuts and berries from the woods, harvesting fruits, and making alcohol. Now that the threats of beasts and demons had finally been alleviated, everyone's lives had begun to settle down and they were all looking forward to the harvest. At a time like this, none of us wanted to arouse fear in people by spreading unsettling rumors.

"Don't worry. I'm sure this will work out somehow." I forced a smile.

The duke laughed. "I start to believe it when I hear it from you."

"Hmph. Don't let the hero treatment go to your head, or your complacency will be the end of you," Bishop Bagley said, showing his concern in his usual way.

Menel and I looked at each other and exchanged wry smiles.



There was some further discussion over a host of little details, and then we left the mansion. His Excellency and the bishop seemed to have even more to talk about. They had it tough.

"So, what are we doing?" Menel asked. "Right now, I mean."

"Let's go see Bee first to get information on the Rust Mountains. She should be in the plaza right now."

Menel gave a small grunt and pulled the hood of his cloak over his eyes. There was a reason he preferred to avoid attention.

"Fff." Menel scrunched up his face as if to say he'd known this was coming. The plaza was filled with the sound of a three-stringed instrument known as a rebec.

"Near and far away, vicious-looking beasts ran riot. People and horses came and went no longer. The north wind drowned out wails and cries. Around the woods, the howls of beasts echoed."

The tale being recited was one I had heard before, of people suffering at the hands of demons and the beasts they controlled.

A single young holy warrior with the blessing of the god of the flame

appeared from parts unknown. The young warrior reformed a beautiful half-elven hunter who was turning to crime in that time of distress, and the two became friends. The warrior saved him from his predicament, and they headed to the city together.

What they encountered there was a wyvern bent on the city's destruction. The warrior broke its neck with his bare hands and gained renown. He raised the people's plight with the lord, who dubbed him a paladin for his commendable resolve. His name drew brave adventurers to his cause.

At last, the paladin and his party finally headed to the barren valley that was the base of the demons and their beasts. But they were caught in a despicable trap and forced to flee. The paladin fought his way out of the battle with the dark power of his sealed demonblade. But when his friend was gravely injured, the demonblade's darkness came close to engulfing him.

As the warrior was nearly reduced to a berserker, his friend the half-elf brought him back with words and fist. Hot tears were shed; an embrace was shared. The two regained their solidarity, and gave battle to the beasts.

"Thus the heroes marched on the valley, where a great, clawed beast stood in their path. The head of a lion, with razor fangs. The head of a goat, with evil magic. The head of a dragon, with crimson fire. And its wriggling tail, a venomous snake. Its raging roars rent the wind, and its feet shook the earth as it walked."

Leading the other beasts was a gigantic beast with three heads called a chimera. The warriors set up a wall of shields, raised their swords high, and bravely took on the pack. Among those warriors was a swordsman also known as the Penetrator, who used a sword faster and sharper than anyone else's.

"William the Faraway Paladin and Meneldor of Swift Wings charged into battle together."

Around here, the storyteller's speech style began to heat up.

"O great god lost to history, O reticent guide of souls! God of the flame, ruler of the eternal cycle, Gracefeel! Will you guide our heroes to the darkness ravaging the frontier, and show your radiance to the world once more?!"

The chimera battle was tremendous. I listened as Sir William, with his peerless strength, grappled with the chimera and punched it with his bare hands. Ohh, he just punched the chimera and sent it flying. It hit a rock and smashed it in half. I let out a “whoa” in spite of myself. What a hero.

Menel, beside me, had a huge frown on his face.

When it came to the half-elven hunter, descriptions of his beauty abounded. Every time he did something, excited squeals would come from the audience, particularly the girls.

“Ahaha...”

Young men with brownish hair and blue eyes could be found everywhere, so I didn’t stand out that much. Menel, on the other hand, was a half-elf with silver hair and jade eyes. He couldn’t have been more distinctive. These stories meant he would become the center of all kinds of attention, so he was probably feeling a bit uncomfortable.

But as the passionate retelling of our chimera kill continued beyond the throng in the proud and happy voice of the storyteller, Menel’s expression softened, a reluctant smile crossed his lips, and he let out a sigh, as if the will to resist had deflated out of him.

At the same time, a loud cheer erupted from the audience. Sir William had just impaled the chimera’s lion head with his favorite spear.



The tale ended, and tips were thrown. I waited for the audience to disperse, and as the troubadour was packing up, I waved a hand and called out to her in a subdued voice.

“Bee.”

Her pointed ears pricked up. It seemed that was all she’d needed. She whipped around in surprise, and her face lit up with a beaming smile. She came running over and catapulted herself at me, crying out, “You were listening!”

“It worked out that way, yeah!” I said as I caught her and spun in circles on the stone paving. She giggled playfully. This girl, a halfling troubadour with

charming facial expressions, messy red hair, and the physique of a child, was our friend Robina Goodfellow. She was as bright as ever today.

“It looks like it’s still popular.”

“You have *no idea*. It’s my go-to staple thanks to you! Look at this!” Bee showed us a basket full of copper and silver coins. “Made a bundle yet again! Yeeeah!”

“Good to see our hard work is making piles of cash for someone,” Menel said jokingly.

“Awww. Okay then, it’s near enough lunch time anyway, I think I oughta pay you guys back a little!” Bee laughed, put her hands on her hips, and looked up at us. “What do you wanna eat, you two?”

“Meat,” Menel said immediately.

“You know if your fans heard that they’d be so let down.”

“Shaddup.”

“Don’t you have something a bit more, I dunno, *something*? Elf-like, elegant, you know.”

“Okay. Vegetables. Garnishing the meat.”

That got a laugh out of me.

In the poems and stories, elves were an elegant tribe living in the depths of the forest in harmony with nature, and didn’t have much of an image as meat-eaters. But in actual fact, living in the woods—living in harmony with the woods—also meant eating animal meat as a predator. I had a memory of learning from Gus long ago that the reason elves were renowned as archers was because they were excellent hunters. And that was borne out in reality; Menel was quite the meat-eater.

“What about you, Will?”

“Meat for me too, I think... It isn’t often we come here to the city.”

“You warriors are real meat-lovers, huh...”

As a side note, there weren’t many opportunities to eat the meat of livestock

in the countryside. I would say there were only two main times: when old livestock died, and during the autumn when it came time to slaughter livestock that wouldn't survive the winter. Cows and horses were valuable workers, after all, and it took quite a lot of effort to slaughter and butcher even a single one. Not only that, but those animals could be taken to the city and sold for cash rather than eaten.

Due to all those various reasons, everyday meals in the countryside would normally be bread, wheat porridge, and beans, or occasionally the meat of birds and other wild animals that a huntsman would come back with.

In the city, however, cattle and other animals brought in alive from the countryside were slaughtered and broken down everyday, and they lined the front of the butcher's. Because of the large population, there would always be people who wanted meat today, and dedicated businesses and shops could survive here by meeting that demand. And with specialist shops came an increase in eateries that depended on them to serve meat. All of which meant that you could get your hands on a meat dish far more readily in the city than anywhere else. Passing it up wasn't an option.

"Boy oh boy, you two have no grace at all," Bee said, spreading her arms in feigned disappointment.

"Oh yeah, and what about you?" Menel asked. "What do you want?"

"Me? Hmm..." The red-haired troubadour looked as though she was thinking for a moment, and then she laughed. "Meat, I think!"



A little before noon, the three of us carnivores were drawn to a tavern by the delicious smell of meat, and we went straight in before it got too busy. As Bee secured us a table meant for four, she called out to the brown-skinned shop owner boiling something in a large pot. "Excuse me! What are you cooking today?"

"Boiled mutton, my dear!" he replied in a spirited voice.

"Woo! For three, please, and great big helpings!"

"Comin' right up!"

What came out on each of our plates was a well-boiled, piping-hot lump of mutton on the bone. On the side, there were also boiled vegetables, and some kind of bread made by kneading wheat flour into dough, fermenting it, and then steaming it. It was similar to the steamed buns I knew from my past life. Because the city of Whitesails was a port town facing an inland sea, you could see food culture from a wealth of regions here, which was really interesting.

“Ah, this is Arid Climate cooking, isn’t it?” Bee said, pinpointing its origin in a single glance.

“Sure is,” came the reply from the cook. “That’s the taste of my homeland.”

Arid Climate... I’d heard of it before. If my memory served me, it was a land of nomads, sprawling steppes, and endless wastes. True to its name, dry winds blew across the land, and climatically, it was cool. I’d heard that although caravans of merchants crossed that land heading to countries in the far east, it was quite a dangerous place that was scattered with plateaus controlled by tribes of goblins. And finally, the thing that had left the biggest impression on me when I heard about the place was—

“Is it true that there’s a race of centaurs around there? Half-man, half-horse?”

The shopkeeper laughed and nodded. “There sure are. Scarily good with a bow, every last one of ’em. All right, I’ll leave you to dig in.” And he went back to the kitchen.

Menel, still with his hood on, stared intently at the mutton. “From below the neck up to the ribs, looks like,” he said, identifying the cut.

It looked delicious. My anticipation built. But instead of immediately attacking the food, I first paused for a moment. “Mater our Earth-Mother, gods of good virtue, bless this food, which by thy merciful love we are about to receive, and let it sustain us in body and mind.” I prayed with my hands together. “For the grace of the gods, we are truly thankful.”

As I finished offering the prayer, Menel and Bee joined in. “We are truly thankful.”

“Let’s eeeeat!”

We took our knives and wiped them, then inserted them into the lumps of

boiled mutton in front of us and started cutting them up. None of us spoke, although it wasn't on purpose; it just happened as we each intently focused on taking apart the meat. I'd heard it said that people can't talk much while eating crab, and apparently the same thing went for mutton.

I inserted the knife, cut away a single bone and all the meat that surrounded it, and sunk my teeth in. My mouth filled with the umami flavor of the meat and a saltiness that was just a little stronger than I expected. The mutton had a pretty distinctive smell and texture, and every time I bit into it, the flavor seemed to ooze out and really gave me the feeling that I was eating *meat*. The light and fluffy steamed buns had a mild flavor to them, and worked well to break up the meal, like white rice.

"This is great!"

"Ya, this one's a winner."

"Told you! Ah, it's good eaten between bread, too."

"Hm, I hadn't thought about that." I tore open one of the steamed buns and stuffed the boiled vegetables and some of the meat I'd cut off inside it. It was delicious.

But I thought this was a good point to take a break, and decided to broach the main topic. "By the way, there's something I want to ask you, Bee."

"Hm? What's that?"

"Something's come up, and... I want to know as much as possible about the Rust Mountains."

"About the Rust Mountains?" Bee lifted her eyes from the boiled meat and knife in front of her and looked at me. "A poet's poems aren't free, bucko. Gonna pay me for the info?" She grinned at me mischievously.

"P-Pay you? Umm..."

Menel spoke up before I could. "If we end up going to the Rust Mountains, you'll be first to hear about what we got up to. Material for a brand-new adventure story. Sound good?"

"Okey-dokey, you've got a deal!" Bee nodded.

I had a bad habit of overthinking comments that weren't meant to mean anything. I needed to learn to think on my feet more.

"That said, I really don't know all that much." Bee laid her knife next to the boiled mutton on the plate for the moment, and started to talk. "Two hundred years ago, the Rust Mountains were apparently called the Iron Mountains. And there used to be a country there called the Iron Country. It was the underground kingdom of the dwarves, the mountain-dwellers that are the minions of Blaze, god of fire and craft. It was a powerful country that made a name for itself during the Union Age."

Bee continued. "But that was just another thing lost in the chaos of two hundred years ago. The dwarf lord in his halls of stone, along with many powerful warriors, died fighting in those mountains trying to hold back the demon invasion. Much blood was shed, many weapons lay scattered on the ground... and once the Iron Mountains became a den of demons, at some point they started being referred to as the Rust Mountains instead. That's what I've heard."

It represented the ruin of what iron once was, the pitiful wreckage of former glory, full of corroded weapons and the rusted, metallic smell of spilled blood.

"I don't know the details of what happened in that battle," she said. "There really is no info at all."

"Why's that?"

"Because the dwarven warriors and the people of those mountains who fought to defend them were completely wiped out. And also..." Bee took a breath before continuing. "Because the fate of the dwarves who escaped their country was so cruel. You must know, Will, you sheltered some dwarven refugees about a year ago, right?"

I thought back to those people with exhausted eyes. They had been covered in mud, smelled foul, and had huge beards covering their sunken cheeks.

"It's obvious what would happen to a people driven out of their homeland by war, right? That's why they won't tell me anything about the mountains that were once their home, or the last battle that happened there. It's a hard, painful memory for them, one of tragedy and humiliation, but at the same time,

their shared memories of glory are the single bond keeping them together and allowing them to hold onto their pride.”

Even though Bee had no instrument and was just talking off the cuff, there was a kind of power in the way she spoke. She had a flowing, sing-song voice that was pleasing to the ear, and she knew just how to pause to draw the listener in.

“So it’s a secret they keep hidden within themselves. No one who isn’t from the fallen Iron Country knows. So that’s all I can tell you. Sorry...” Bee gave an apologetic smile. “If you want to know anything else... I think there were dwarves who migrated to your river port, right?”

“Yeah.”

“They’d open up if you were the one asking, I think. No, I’m sure of it. If you keep what I said in mind.”

I nodded and smiled at her. “Thank you.”

I wondered how much of it they would tell me. While picturing the rugged faces of the dwarves, I thought about the prosperity and fall of that kingdom of mountain people.



After that, Bee said she would wander about singing her stories for a while longer, and Menel and I left her to it. We departed the city of Whitesails and headed south.

After a few days, we returned to Beast Woods, and stepped foot into the fairy trail.

Once again that strange scenery surrounded us, of day and night trading places at whirlwind speed, the forest wriggling, fairies whispering amongst each other, and horribly thick darkness. The tingle I felt down my spine was no different than the first time I’d done this. I walked cautiously through that place for about half a day, the sense of awe and fear never leaving me.

We passed through a strange ring of light that was the way out of the fairy trail, and our field of view opened up. I felt wind blowing towards me. I took a

moment to get my bearings, and realized that it was dusk, and I was standing on top of a hill.

An endless number of trees stood tall, and beyond them an orange sun was setting in a red sky. The sky around me had started to turn the color of night, and I could just make out the twinkling of the stars. There was forest as far as my eyes could see, and a vast river snaking through it.

I shifted my gaze and saw that straddling that great river was a ruined city of two colors: a dull gray, and the green of clinging plants. And nestled right next to it was an expanse of soft-red brick roofs and white plaster. It was a living city, with people coming and going through it.

A long time ago, after I had that battle with the god of undeath and said goodbye to my parents, I followed this river from the city of the dead downstream to the north. It was there, before meeting Menel, that I had seen a half-submerged city, and at this very moment, human hands were hard at work redeveloping it.

“Looking at it like this, it’s gotten pretty big,” Menel said in a murmur.

“Yeah. It’s grown quite a lot in just two years.”

We talked about it as we made our way down the hill and said hello to the people we passed as we walked through the sunset streets.

We found Tonio near the harbor, talking about something with a warehouse keeper. Noticing us, he cut his discussion short, gave us a brief wave, and came over.

“Welcome back, both of you.”

“Thank you!”

“You’ve returned considerably earlier than I was expecting. Is the abnormal —”

“Safely resolved. We’re done with our report to the duke as well.”

Tonio looked at us in amazement.

Menel and I looked at each other and laughed conspiringly.

“Goodness, you truly are frightening. What trick did you use this time?”

“A secret elemental trick,” Menel said. “Might not be much use for business, though. It’s not suited for transporting stuff.”

“It sounds useful for gathering information, however. I’d very much like to hear the details from you later, if you’d be willing to share.”

“I said it’s a fig secret and you’re still trying to get it out of me? Wow. Aggressive tactics.”

“I *am* a salesman,” Tonio said, laughing.

When I first met Tonio, I got quite an impression of tiredness from him, but lately I was getting the feeling that some of his spirit had returned. Maybe the fact that business was booming had caused self-confidence, a sense of fulfillment, and all those kinds of things to show on his face.

The redevelopment of this city was something Tonio had taken the opportunity to propose while the adventurers were still in one place after getting rid of that chimera. We had sent many parties of battle-hardened adventurers out on a large-scale sweep to remove all the dangers still hanging out in the ruins. With Ethel’s support, we had performed maintenance on the river port, dismantled the ruined buildings for materials, and rebuilt houses.

Then, using this place as his base of operations, Tonio started a lumber business in the depths of Beast Woods, felling trees, building rafts, and sending them downstream. This was hugely successful. The development of the Whitesails area had left it in need of firewood for fuel and lumber for construction. Meanwhile, Beast Woods, which was located upstream, had a ruined port city that could be redeveloped, as well as an abundance of wood resources. Where there’s demand for something, you stand to make a big profit if you can find a method of supplying it.

That may seem obvious, but it was the way that Tonio reliably spotted those obvious opportunities and actually took advantage of them that defined his way of doing business.

As for me, after I killed the chimera, the areas around there had reached an easy consensus on making me a feudal lord, but it seemed that all they were

expecting from me was the military might to guarantee the region's safety and for me to use my title of paladin to stand in front of His Excellency and represent the area. It wasn't as though there were a mountain of things for me to make decisions on, either. In fact, despite being a lord, I didn't even have a house.

I'll repeat that: I didn't even have a house.

I thought of persuading some village to let me live with them, but my entry into the village would mean I would be forcing my way into the top of their social hierarchy. There would be people who wouldn't be very happy about that, and others who would try to use me. Furthermore, I thought it was completely foreseeable that some people in the village would get the idea of using my existence to give themselves the diplomatic advantage in relations with other villages. So given all that friction I would probably cause, I was hesitant to ask to live in a village without careful thought.

There was the option of not settling anywhere and governing by traveling around my territory—I knew examples of that from my past life—but that method had all kinds of problems, so I wanted to avoid it if possible.

And so I decided to get on board with Tonio's business. I invested, helped provide security, and while I was at it, I settled here in this newly formed city.

Together with Menel and some adventurers including Reystov, I spearheaded beast and demon hunts for the city's security and provided medical treatment. Sometimes I headed out to various places in Beast Woods by request and handled an assortment of minor issues by coordinating with His Excellency and the priests I had borrowed from Bishop Bagley, including Anna. And that was how I spent my days.

It was just about that time that it happened. A band of mountainfolk—that is, dwarves—came, hearing that the woods had become pretty safe. I was the first one to meet them, in the woods. They were covered in dirt and mud, and looked as though they had fought starvation and wild animals to get here and only barely made it. They seemed to be really struggling, so I provided them with food and temporary lodging, and tried to help them find jobs.

Dwarves were a race of craftsmen who were good with their hands, but these

were drifters, and I wasn't expecting a high level of specialized knowledge from them. But once we got talking, I found that many of them did have a surprising amount of knowledge in things like smithing, the manufacture of leather, woodworking, pottery, weaving, and carpentry. I asked them why on earth they had gone through so much just to come all the way here to the depths of Beast Woods, but they wouldn't speak about it.

In any case, since they had skills like that, I wasn't going to let their talents go to waste. I decided to invest most of the money I had on hand, which I'd gotten from exploring ruins and so on, into their craft. I offered to lend them the funds to build all kinds of facilities: a woodworking shop to process the logs after they'd been chopped down, a leather-processing facility for making products out of the skins of the beasts we hunted, a smithy, kilns for pottery and making charcoal, and more.

I intended that proposal to be taken at face value, but they goggled at me in surprise, and came to the negotiating table greatly fearful and wary of what kind of terrible interest and terms I would impose on them. And when I presented them with the interest and terms, they goggled at me again.

But for me at the time, it was a necessary decision. There are an unbelievable number of things needed to maintain and expand a newly created settlement: weavers, woodworkers, stonemasons, carpenters, blacksmiths, leatherworkers, charcoal burners, and much more besides. At the beginning, you can get by to a certain extent with makeshift purchases and amateur work, but before long, you need skilled professionals.

There weren't very many craftsmen curious enough to come all the way to the back of Beast Woods when they already had marketable skills. So now that people who had the skills we so badly needed had made their *own* way to us, there was no way I could waste their potential on unskilled labor like loading and unloading wood. They were emphatically worth spending my money on.

However, simply lending a person money would just make them suspect that I had some underlying motive. That was particularly true for these dwarves, many of whom were acting very cautious. I could only guess what had happened to them while they had been out roaming the land. Several among them insisted that creating debts was a bad idea. I visited them several times,

each time re-explaining my circumstances in the hope of winning their trust.

As I bowed my head to them for the nth time and told them we needed them, their leader, a man named Agnarr, spoke up. “I think,” he said, “if this man betrays us... none of us could be blamed for having believed him. What do you think, everyone?”

I remembered feeling very happy for those words.

Not long after, workshops of all kinds were built; the air filled with the sounds of hammers, saws, and looms; and fires burned in kilns.

Once workshops existed, people opened shops targeted at the people who worked there. As the list of items being shipped to Whitesails grew longer, there was also an increase in the number of ships coming and going along the big river. Of course, it was a waste for the ships to come back up the river without any cargo, so they started to return loaded with things they thought they could sell here, and after selling them, they went back down the river loaded with this city’s products.

Goods and money changed hands again and again, and this was accompanied by an influx of people. By now, this place that was once a half-submerged city was rapidly becoming a center for river trade. Ships carrying wood and leather goods cruised down the river with the logs, and ships loaded with products came from downstream, their sails swollen with the wind.

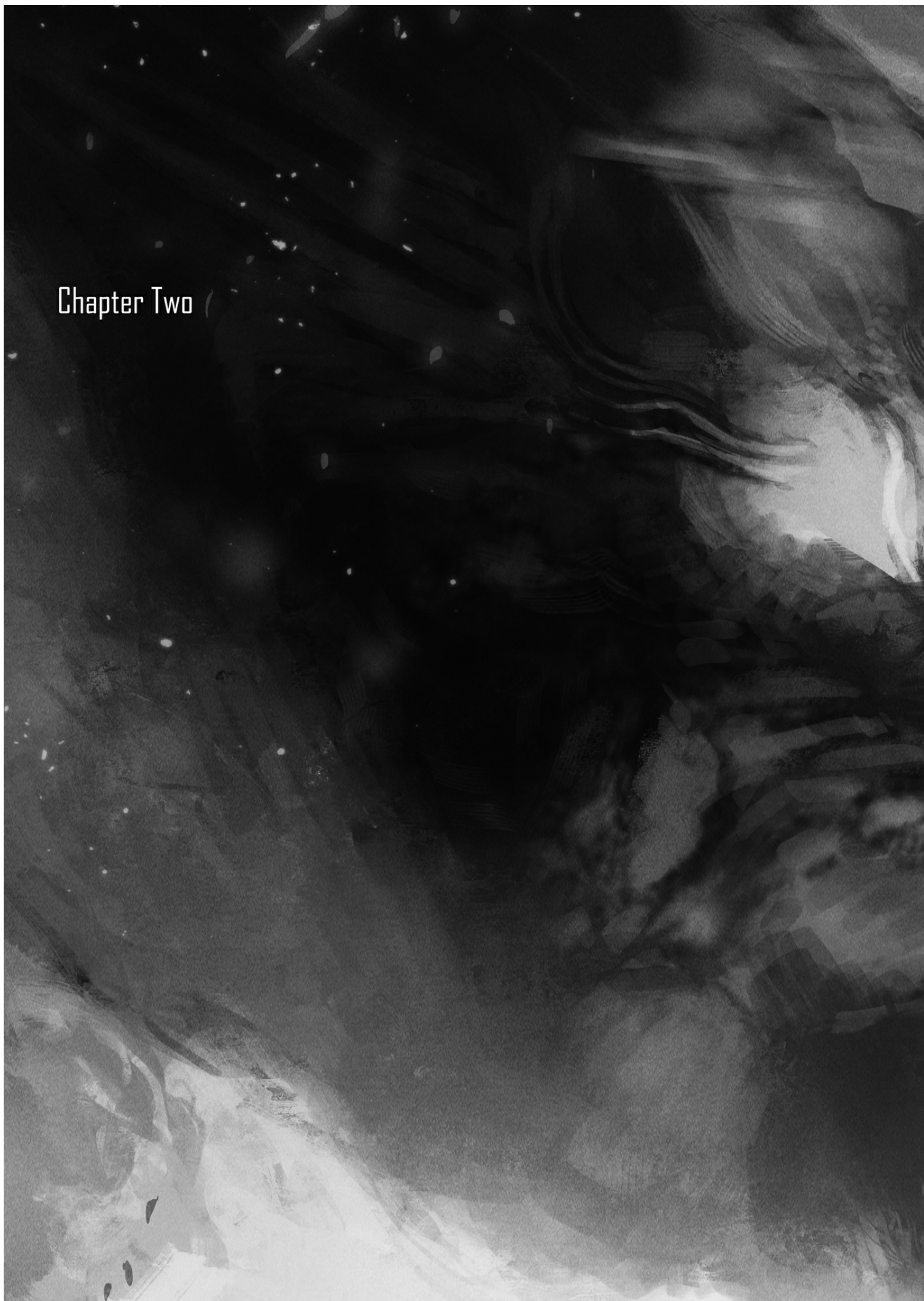
More and more houses were appearing each day, and the sounds of the craftsmen’s hammers and saws never stopped until the sun went down. I felt quite happy about it all.

“Well then, shall we head back?”

“Yep!”

People now called this city “Torch Port.”

Chapter Two



That night, after I fell asleep in my home in Torch Port, I had a dream.

It was a dream of that city of the dead, of which I had such fond memories.

“Listen closely, Will. What, in fact, are the fae?” Gus, with his pale blue body, spoke slowly while stroking his chin. “In a time beyond time, the God of Creation spoke the Words, engraved the Signs, made the sun and the moon, split day from night, and gathered water to separate the oceans and the earth. Fire was born, wind was born, trees were born. It was before gods, and before people.”

Blood was there too, leaning his skeletal body against the wall, hearing Gus’s lesson but not listening to it. It was a peaceful moment in the afternoon.

“Within the water, earth, fire, air, and trees dwell the great Words of the First God. They were more than natural phenomena; they possessed clear individual will.”

“Phenomena with minds of their own?”

“It may be hard for you to imagine... Hmm, especially since there are no elementalists here. If there had been, I could have had them make the sylphs dance or something; that would have made the explanation simple. Well, no matter.” Gus shook his head.

That “no matter” didn’t mean “it doesn’t matter anyway”—rather, it meant “you will meet one before long, so you simply need to keep this in the back of your mind.” And in actual fact, I did meet Menel shortly after, and could now understand what Gus meant by “phenomena with individual will.”

“Owing to the fact that they had wills of their own, these fae split into two types after their creation. The first was a long-lived way of existence spent clinging to unstable phenomena along with the lesser minions, that is, the fairies and elementals. If an elemental were to go to a mountain of fire, even today he should be able to see a great fae known as a Lord of Fire there, with elementals of fire obeying its will. In the depths of the vast oceans there would drift a Lord of the Sea, and deep in an ocean of trees a Lord of the Woods would stand silent.”

Gus paused. “Elementalists, incidentally, are those who can perceive and

communicate with the fae and fairies who exist in the invisible world overlapping our transient one. Shamans, in other words.”

As I listened to Gus, I nodded and took notes. There was no better way of remembering things than listening, thinking, and writing.

“The other group, however, chose a different path.”

“A different path?”

“Not the nebulous existence of the fae, omnipresent within phenomena, sometimes existing, sometimes not, perhaps dead, perhaps alive, and at some point becoming too indistinct to perceive. Instead, they chose to live a crystal-clear existence, and die a crystal-clear death. In other words, the human way of life.”

I found it slightly amusing that Gus the ghost was the one saying this to me. He seemed to be aware of this and shrugged his shoulders. “They fell in love with humanity.”

His uncharacteristically romantic phrasing caused Blood to make a sound like he was spitting out a drink. Gus instantly willed a small pebble to fly in his direction.

“Ow! What was that for, old man?!”

“You know what! Now pipe down!”

After muttering irritably under his breath for a moment, Gus continued. “Of the elementals who longed for life with a body of flesh, those who belonged to the air, water, and trees brought the matter up with the goddess of the forest, Rhea Silvia. She was a pleasure-seeker, impulsive and fickle, but that was why she was able to see eye to eye with the ever-changing phenomena that the fae were.”

And the goddess saw fit to grant the fae what they desired.

“Thus the elves were born as the minions of the goddess Rhea Silvia. They were a race with lives as long as the trees, as swift as a gale, and as graceful as a flowing spring. That goddess who lived for love took the fae’s admiration for humans into account, and made it so that the two races would be compatible. It

is said that this is the reason that humans and elves can produce mixed-blood children.”

Gus shrugged his shoulders. “But there is an old saying: ‘The neighbor’s wheat looks riper.’ It is sometimes the case that a thing can only be admired from a distance. Although some elves actively mingled with humans, there were also those who yearned for the time they were fae.”

He went on. “Those elves of ancient times, who lived with passion and mixed with people, disappeared naturally with time due to their mixed blood and natural lifespans. Even now, every once in a while, a half-elf will be born from two human parents—a remnant of those elder elves. Meanwhile, the elves who yearned for the days of the fae, and chose to live deep in the forest and insularly among their own kind, preserved their purity.”

“Uhh, I don’t—”

“I’m not trying to say one’s better than the other or make some kind of point here. I am simply telling you that there were two groups who each made different choices. Nothing more.”

It felt like a topic I could see myself sinking into thought over, but Gus seemed relatively content to brush it aside.

“Yeah, so, ’cause of all that, the elves who exist now are pretty unsocial. They’re good guys if you get to know ’em, but that can take a while.” Blood added to Gus’s explanation. “They’re a skinny bunch, but quick on their feet, and they make good hunters and fighters. Many of ’em have what it takes to be elementalists, too. They go back to the fae, after all. Uh, the takeaway here is, don’t get in a fight with an elf in a forest. ’Cause that’s some scary shit.”

Blood then told me that there were apparently even some he had no idea what to make of, who had mastered elementalism to its utmost limits and could discard their body of flesh and turn back into a fae.

“Those stories are somewhat unreliable...” Gus said. “Though, if there were to be a being capable of such a thing, I doubt it would be anything other than an elf. They are the minions of the god of the forest, and the closest things there are to fae. They are close to human, and far from it, too. A great race.”

With that, Gus brought his talk about the elves to a close.

“But there were also some who obtained flesh-and-blood bodies in a different way: the fae of earth, rock, and fire. Earth and rock command the attribute of immutability, while fire controls destruction and creation. None of them were very close to the goddess Rhea Silvia, and neither did they long for the human way of life.”

“Really? Then why did they get physical bodies?”

“The object of their admiration was human technology. They found it incredibly fascinating, the way we extracted ore from the earth, heated it with fire, refined it, and made it into metal. It is said that fae and fairies are not generally too fond of metals and money, so these were certainly an odd group.” He shrugged. “They made their way to see Blaze, god of fire and craft. Blaze was stubborn and spoke little, preferring to create and tinker, but he was also a god of battle and anger who, once enraged, would bring about terrible destruction. He exchanged brief words with the fae who had shown an interest in the industrial arts, and once he was sure of the strength of their determination, he nodded wordlessly, and granted them physical bodies as his own minions.”

Gus commented that so far this was the same as the elves.

“And so the race of dwarves was born as the minions of the fire god Blaze. The dwarves were as unyielding as earth and stone. They lived long lives, could see through darkness like their way was lit by fire, and were skilled in the use of the furnace. But they were destined to deal in the metals the fae disliked, and so their nature started to diverge from the purity of the fae, and the fairies kept their distance. Due to this, there are no elementalists among them comparable to the elves.”

In silence, I listened to him talk. It was an interesting story that felt rewarding to listen to. I thought about the elves and dwarves, races that looked like humans but were not, and wondered if I’d meet them in the outside world someday.

“Instead, they put their faith in the deity Blaze who was their forefather. They researched the old Words and combined them with the skills of metallurgy and engraving. When it comes to the art of infusing objects with Words—that is to

say, engraving the Signs—you will not find more talented artisans. The majority of the dwarves live in mines, preferring to live underground due to their origins as fae of the earth and rock. They are short, perhaps related to where they live, and barrel-chested. They are heavy drinkers, they are physically strong, and the majority of them grow beards. And on top of being highly talented craftsmen, they are also excellent warriors.”

When I heard that, my eyes naturally went straight to Blood. “Yeah,” he said, and nodded. “Those guys are the real deal.”

I was shocked. I could tell from Blood’s voice that this was genuine praise.

“T-Tell me more about them!”

“More? Uh, I’ll give it a shot. Hmm...” Blood thought for a little while. “They’re simple, honest people, and... they understand the meaning of fighting, and what courage is. They’re more upright inside their hearts than anyone’s ever stood.”

There was no sarcastic response from Gus, not this time. Instead, with gentle eyes, he simply listened to him speak.

“One thing is always on their minds, day in and day out.”

“What’s that?”

“The question of what’s worth laying down their life for. What’s their reason to fight.” Pale blue will-o’-the-wisps roared in Blood’s eye sockets. “And when they find it—” He paused. “They go into battle with their souls burning with the fire of courage, and never once fear death.”

I got the chills. If they could make *Blood* of all people say that, these dwarves had to be incredible, true warriors.

“I salute those dwarven warriors. The ones I met, at least, and who fought alongside me, were true champions.”

I was now greatly looking forward to the day I’d meet them. I wondered what their faces looked like, their straight backs, their braided beards, their shining axes, their prideful, forthright gaze. I imagined all those things, and fantasized of the day when I would fight shoulder-to-shoulder with them.

“As for me, I am not particularly fond of them,” Gus said sullenly.

I was surprised to hear him say that. “Really?”

“Mm... Of course, I will admit they have marvelous knowledge and skills. I will even admit they are warriors with resolve,” he said, and sighed. “But I’ve never known such an obstinate, tightfisted lot in all my life! They are unbelievable!”

I stood there blinking speechlessly for a moment, then looked to Blood and saw him meeting my gaze with a look that said “Can you believe this guy?”

Gus clearly had a repulsion for his own kind.



I awoke in dim light. I could see the room’s plank ceiling above me. I’d had a pretty nostalgic dream.

“Oh...”

Somehow, I got the feeling that I now understood the real reason I’d helped out those dwarves back then: I’d felt sad. And it wasn’t because my imagination had been betrayed; it wasn’t because they hadn’t had straight backs, braided beards, shining axes, and prideful, forthright gazes. It was because Blood, the one and only Blood, had acknowledged this race as warriors, and they had looked at me nervously, cautiously, submissively, covered in dirt and mud, with thin arms and legs, and their eyes flicking about, full of insecurity. And the sight of them was just terribly, unbearably sad.

That isn’t what you are, I must have been wanting to tell them. It simply isn’t. In truth, you all... are amazing. You’re... so, so much more—

Of course, I was just pushing the image I had inside my head onto them unasked. I knew that. But even so, I couldn’t help myself. I wanted them to take back their pride, to drop that submissive, nervous look, to hold up their heads and push out their chests. And that was why I was so happy that they were able to live with pride here in this city.

I slowly got out of bed. It was made of bundles of straw with a white sheet pulled over it. It was much better than sleeping directly on piles of hay, because now the straw didn’t scratch my body. I slowly opened the door, went out into

the hall, and to the well in my yard.

The house I currently lived in was located close to the center of the city. It had been refurbished from a mansion in the ruins that had managed to retain its structure comparatively well. I hadn't especially been looking for a big house to live in, but if I had refused a big house, it would have made everyone else feel awkward. Besides, they suggested it as a good idea because I often had visitors and guests who needed a place to stay, anyway.

As I result, I ended up employing some servants—specifically, maids. I had memories of the novels from my previous world, so the sound of the words “employing maids” had made my heart flutter a little, but—

“Ah. Good morning.”

“Ohh, good morning, young master William.”

“Pffhaha, don't you look a sight! Go and tidy your hair, dearie!”

The ones who applied were old ladies who lived nearby. That's reality for you.

Of course, that aside, they did great work with the cleaning, cooking, and laundry, so it was very helpful having them around. Thanks to them, I had a lot more free time to spend on my own training. Gus had mentioned to me before that money could buy time to a certain extent, and this was exactly what he meant.

I used a bucket to fetch some water from the well. As I pulled the bucket up, I thought about how useful it would be to have a hand-operated pump. I thought I remembered it using a directional valve and pressure to draw up the water... but couldn't quite remember the full details. But thinking about it more carefully, we couldn't afford to be so wasteful with metal anyway. I might have been able to recreate the design, but we wouldn't be able to make it widespread, so I concluded as I washed my face and rinsed my mouth that there was almost no point.

“Okay.”

I had bed head, so I put water through it to fix it. It didn't work.

“Huh?” I wet my hair a little more and made sure it was just the way I wanted

it. Boing. My hair sprang up again. “Grr...” I adjusted it once more, this time really taking care to set it properly.

“Finally!”

It sprang up again. It was being horrendously stubborn.

I fixed it. It sprang up. I fixed it. It sprang up.

“O-Okay. This time I’ve definitely got it.” Boing. “Gaaahh!!”

I tipped the entire bucket of water over my head.



“That’s why your head’s so soaking wet?”

Menel and I were in the yard. While laughing at my stupidity, Menel continued to press my head in one direction, while I resisted and pushed back against him. We were doing neck training.

Training the neck muscles is modestly important. If you’re punched in the head or have your legs swept out from under you, it’s your neck muscles that protect your head. If they’re weak, it’s relatively easy to get seriously hurt.

“Come on! Nine... ten!”

“Gnnngh...”

As he pressed with all of his strength, I breathed out slowly and resisted with all of my own, pushing his hand back.

“Okay. Swap.”

I exhaled and relaxed.

And we just kept going like that, piling up basic muscle and stretching exercises. Arms, legs, abs, back—each day, the place I focused on was different, but I made sure to train every body part I used in battle. Having a flexible and strong body underpinned everything, and I would lose it if I didn’t keep up my training and consume enough food.

Back in the city of the dead, I was able to train every single day, but once I started getting work and needed to be on the move, that wasn’t so easy. Having finally established a central base, I had recently become able to train sufficiently

again, and without that, I probably wouldn't have been able to overpower the cernunnos physically. Blood had done well to keep up that much muscle power while being a traveler. I wondered if he'd used some kind of trick. I should have asked him.

"Okay, so next is..."

"Swings," I said, and picked up what I'd be practicing with. It was not a sword, but something about three times as heavy: a long and thick block of wood with a handle attached. I gave it a test swing to start off. It made a satisfyingly low sound as it gouged a path through the air.

Blood had told me that being able to swing around training equipment heavier than a weapon was the best indication that you'd be able to swing around your actual weapon in the heat of battle. I saw no faults with that argument, either.

Menel let out a short, incredulous laugh. "Ridiculous strength. You'd never know it from looking at you."

Being a descendant of the elves, Menel had a slim body, amazing agility, and was able to burst into action incredibly quickly. But that wasn't all; he had his own share of strength, as well.

"But I *wanted* people to know it from looking at me!" I said.

Of course, even with the way my body looked right now, people *were* getting the impression that I worked out. That was good. But for some reason, I wasn't turning out like Blood. No one would describe me as "a commanding, heroic-looking man!" or "a giant of muscle!" My skeletal structure and that kind of thing was probably part of the issue, but I was also starting to suspect that in this world, muscle mass and muscle strength weren't entirely proportional. Maybe mana or some factor like that had something to do with it.

In any case, I wanted more of a "tough guy" image, but both my body and my personality were finding it very difficult to complete the transformation, and I thought that was a tremendous shame.

"People like you. Why change?"

"Look, people long for what they don't have, okay?!"

“Learn to be satisfied...”

After that brief yet heated discussion, we started practicing our swings, Menel with a practice pole that was skinnier than mine. We practiced downward swings and upward cuts over and over, each of us counting out the repetitions. We moved our legs, torsos, arms, and swords with purpose, making sure to keep them working together so that the movement that started with the legs was conveyed all the way through the tip of the blade.

Verify the current state of your movements and sharpen them toward the future.

“Hm...?”

I felt someone’s gaze on me. Reystov and other adventurers sometimes came to join in with my morning training, and sometimes kids who lived nearby came around as well to peek at what we were doing.

But I got the feeling that wasn’t quite it.



Suspicious, I searched for the source of the gaze—and there it was. On the other side of my small vegetable garden, someone was peeking at us over the hedge. It was someone with black hair. I didn’t recognize them.

“Menel, wait there a moment,” I said, and walked over there.

I didn’t mind them watching, but if they kept on doing it sneakily like that, other people might mistake them for a burglar or something. This world was pretty rough, so when something like that happened, it would sometimes result in angry shouting and possibly even bloodshed. There was no need to peek; all this person needed to do was call out to us, come straight into our yard, and watch. Neither Menel nor I would mind that very much.

“Good morning,” I called out, and the person behind the hedge cringed in fright.

Trembling, they raised their head.

It was a male dwarf with a hunched back and braided black hair. It was hard to tell his age, but his beard was short, so he was probably still young.

“Nice weather, isn’t it?”

“U-Umm... G-Good... morn...ing...” He stood up, flustered.

As we faced each other standing for the first time, I realized he was quite tall for a dwarf, and big-boned, too. But because of his stoop and nervous behavior, his body had none of the intimidating presence I would have expected.

“You’re very welcome to come in and watch, instead of watching from there.” I figured he was introverted, and spoke to him in the calmest, kindest manner I could.

“U-Uh...” His restless eye movement was just starting to calm down, when—

“Hey, Will, what are you fussing about over there?” Menel stopped practicing his swings and came over. He was probably wondering why I was taking so long. “Hm? Who are you? Haven’t seen you around here before.”

After seeing that a new person was now talking to him, the dwarf’s shoulders twitched and he let out a small, frightened squeak.

“All right, brother, I’m not gonna eat you. You interested? Come watch if you want.”

“N-No, I...!”



Menel spoke to him kindly, but the mistake had been made. If you spoke to someone like this in that tone of voice—

“I, I, I’m fine, thank you! I’m sorry for interrupting your training! Bye!”

He bowed his head, hurriedly and yet pretty politely, and then scampered away, almost tripping over himself. I kind of wanted to stop him, but there was a hedge between us, and nothing had really happened to call him all the way back, anyway.

“Mmgh...” After watching him disappear in no time flat, I sent Menel a slightly reproachful look. Maybe it sounded offensive, but I kind of felt as though a cat that was just starting to get used to me had gone and run off...

“Yeah... my fault.” Menel raised a hand as a gesture of mild apology. He was obviously aware. “Turns out that has the opposite effect on guys like that.”

“Of course it does...”

“Not sure if he was interested in the training or you.”

When someone came to peep on us, it was usually one or the other.

“The training, don’t you think? Dwarves are a race of warriors, after all.”

“Did that guy look like he was warrior material to you? My bet’s on him wanting to see the paladin everyone’s been talking about.”

As we talked to each other, I returned to practicing, slightly disappointed. For some reason, I felt like he and I could have gotten along well. I wondered whether he would come to watch me train again.

As I focused, that feeling slowly melted away inside my heart and disappeared.



Hammers clanged, and saws rasped. I could hear looms at work weaving cloth, children playing in the streets, and a boss calling for his apprentices. And together with these, I could hear work songs being sung to set a rhythm for their labor.

Having finished all kinds of jobs of my own, I stood at the entrance to

Dwarftown—the common name for the area around the streets where the dwarves lived—listening to these bright and pleasant sounds.

As I looked around, I noticed that quite a number of extensions and modifications had been made to the stone houses, and many of them now looked more like workshops. Laundry lines were strung everywhere, and clothes were blowing about in the breeze. Thinking to myself that this place always felt alive, I walked in.

As I was walking down the street, one of the rasping noises ceased. Several dwarves who had been doing a little woodwork at the side of the road stopped, took off their hats, and bowed deeply to me. I knew one of them. That slightly chubby, cheerful dwarf with a bushy beard was...

“Thanks for your work, Thori.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Welcome, Paladin. All by your lonesome?”

“Ahaha. It’s nothing that calls for an attendant. Is Agnarr around?”

“If it’s Agnarr you want, he’s at home, I believe! Hodh, go run and let him know the Paladin’s coming!”

“Ai,” a younger dwarf said, nodding. He set down his tools.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that...”

“Nonsense! Agnarr wouldn’t feel right about us just sitting back and not giving our liege lord a proper welcome when he visits!”

“Ai!” The younger dwarf called Hodh nodded and dashed off before I could stop him.

Now that a messenger had been sent out to inform Agnarr about my visit, it would both be rude and a nuisance to him if I made my way over there too soon. After all, the point of sending a messenger to someone was to give them time to prepare. And since I wasn’t here often, I decided to spend a little time talking with Thori before going.

Many of the dwarves were people of relatively few words, but Thori was a talker, and laughed as if he was completely happy to have been born that way. I, too, found him approachable and easy to talk to.

“How has life been treating you recently?” I asked.

“Hahaha! It’s like night and day! I can make what I want, sell what I want! No need to worry about where tomorrow’s meal’s coming from! It’s a real blessing.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Has there been any trouble in the area, or anyone in poverty?”

“Hmm, well...”

Thori came up with a few examples: complaints about the noise from the smithy, trouble that was being caused by lifestyle differences between dwarves and men, and several bread-and-butter matters. I took out a copper writing implement that was a combination of a pen and an inkwell, and noted everything he said on the back of a miswritten document. Paper was too valuable to waste, so I kept a bundle of them on me for memo use.

“Oh? That portable pen is well made.”

“I had Agnarr make it for me some time ago.”

“That explains it. Agnarr’s work is good.”

A portable writing implement was quite a difficult thing to make, but he had made it straight away for me when I asked. There really were a lot of talented craftsmen among the dwarves.

“And... there have been a lot of people moving into this city recently, both humans and dwarves. We can’t complain, I mean, that’s what we did too. But that doesn’t mean we can always find jobs for them...”

“You do have a point.”

“But it’s not healthy for fit young people to be idling around all day not working.”

“Yes, it could even have an effect on crime.” I nodded.

It was good that more people were coming to this area as word of its development got around, but it was obvious that it wasn’t going to be easy to find jobs for all of them. There were a variety that had been created: the loading and unloading of cargo at the river port, the civil engineering and

construction needed to turn the ruins back into a city, commerce and industry jobs, the timber trade, and even service jobs at eateries and taverns. However, that still didn't make it easy to continually create enough employment to support dozens of new people.

Having a job is important. The feeling of contributing to society brings self-esteem to us humans, and if the job is lost, the self-esteem goes with it. At the same time, losing your job means losing your income. Everyone gets panicky and concerned when they're financially insecure and have no idea what tomorrow will bring. People with low self-esteem who are full of anxiety and feeling pressured often only need one little push to turn to crime. They kind of get into a state where excuses for crime seem reasonable.

For instance:

"I've been backed into this terrible situation, so what do you expect?"

"I have no choice; I'm doing it to survive."

"There's no way I'm going to live much longer anyway, so I'll just let loose and do whatever I want."

"There's nothing else I can do. I have no future anymore anyway. I'm not the only one to blame for this; society and everyone else who pushed me this far are just as much at fault. And even if I steal a little from this guy, it's not like it's going to kill him. Come on, be brave! Do it now!"

...And so on.

You might wonder how I could imagine something like that. The answer is that the terrible state I got myself into in my previous world hadn't counted for nothing. I could roughly predict the thoughts of people on the precipice and those who weren't far off.

Anyway, an increase in people like that meant more crime. Of course, there would certainly be people who would admirably endure their situation and not resort to crime, but there would also be perfectly ordinary people who couldn't endure and would resort to such things. Since both groups existed in a certain proportion, an increase in the crime rate was going to be unavoidable the moment you upped the number of jobless, anxious people. And if you couldn't

avoid an increase in crime, public order would deteriorate, more resources would have to be spent on cracking down, and that would start a vicious circle. The problem had to be severed at the root.

People moving here was inevitable, so maybe the solution called for here was to somehow create jobs to keep the economy moving?

If problems like this were allowed to fester, the situations that could grow out of them were really bad. As the number of people coming here increased, people would start fighting over the simple labor jobs that didn't require any particular skills. Public order would deteriorate. A conflict would flare up between the original residents and the migrants. Trouble would start.

It would develop in that manner from what was at first an economic battle into discriminatory feelings against a specific group. And once the economy and discriminatory views started to become entangled, it would cause serious problems that would easily last for several centuries.

This situation was a ticking time bomb, and if we couldn't dismantle it here and now, the explosion in later generations was going to be horrific.

Even in my memories of my past life, the acceptance or restriction of immigration and refugees had been an incredibly large social issue. Now that I'd been put in the position of solving it myself, I understood well how difficult doing so actually was. The economy had to be grown by making sure money was changing hands and there were enough jobs to go around, and unless the issue was taken care of fully, it could snowball into something serious. It really was as Gus said: it was extremely important for money to circulate and keep on circulating. My head was starting to hurt thinking about it.

"Paladin, sir?" Thori said in a concerned voice, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"Oh... Sorry. I'll think up some kind of plan when I get back."

I figured the first step would have to be talking with Tonio to get some kind of public infrastructure project started up, maybe port maintenance or irrigation projects or something, and take on a larger workforce. I also thought I'd better pick the brains of those who knew more about these things. Putting in honest legwork and gathering a consensus of opinions was fundamental to big projects like this. After all, I didn't want to cause any riots, and that meant I needed to

stimulate the economy before that had a chance to happen. It was also going to be important to reduce cultural friction.

Just as I'd finished organizing my thoughts, the young dwarf Hodh who had run off earlier came back with perfect timing. "Ai. Says he'll be waiting."

"All right. Thank you very much for taking the trouble." I smiled and bowed slightly to him.

He opened his eyes wide and waved both hands in front of him frantically. "No, no! Don't bow to me!"

"No, really, it was a big help. And you, Thori. Thank you very much for today. Let's talk again."

"It's an honor to hear that from you, Paladin. Anytime!"

I bowed to both of them and left. The two responded by bending into deep bows until I left their sight, which I found kind of uncomfortable. I soon realized that the other dwarves in the street must have noticed me too, because they were also bowing.

Of course, my place in society was high enough now that it was only natural for that to happen, and strongly refusing their show of respect would only leave them in an awkward position. I had no choice but to accept it, but even so, I couldn't help feeling a little unsettled. Was the reason something to do with my previous life's memories, or was it just that I still wasn't accustomed to it?

I felt that I needed to get used to things like this and learn to assume a dignified air. But on the other hand, the idea of becoming completely accustomed to having people revere me also scared me a little, and I worried that something precious inside me would go numb.

Becoming important wasn't easy.



"I apologize for the sudden visit."

"Not at all. Thank you for coming."

I was in the parlor of one of the larger mansions in Dwarfstown. Those first solemn words had come from a dignified dwarf with a smooth bald head and a

neatly braided steel-gray beard. He was Agnarr, the dwarf with the most influence in this town.

Beside him was a bony old dwarf with sleek white hair. I didn't recognize him. My first thought was that his eyes looked pretty tired.

"This is Grendir. He represents the migrants who moved into this town just recently and is also my great-uncle."

"Pleasure." Keeping it short, he bowed his head to me.

"My name is William. I was entrusted with the governance of these Beast Woods by His Excellency Ethelbald, Duke of Southmark." I placed my right hand over my heart, brought my left foot back slightly, and bowed to him in return. If he represented an entire group, I couldn't afford to treat him lightly.

Grendir responded with the same gesture, performed with incredible fluidity. Did that mean he knew of the old etiquette? If he did—

"Please sit down." My thoughts were interrupted by Agnarr offering me the seat that was reserved for the most important guests.

"Thank you very much." Given my position, I couldn't refuse this, so I suppressed the urge to be polite and sat down.

After a short while, Agnarr's wife brought in some tea.

There are many stories about dwarven women. Some say they are beautiful and fairy-like, while others disagree and say they are incredibly chunky and muscular and have beards. But I had learned from meeting them personally that the correct answer was "all of the above."

In their youths, dwarven women were just a little plump and beautiful like spirits of the forest. But perhaps because they didn't care much about their appearances, once they got married, they quickly turned into looking like rough, middle-aged ladies. And the dwarven men weren't very concerned about the change.

On top of that, it seemed to be part of dwarven culture to hide their women from outsiders and not let them out in public. I suspected that coincidental glimpses of female dwarves had been outsiders' only source of information, and

what had resulted were the extreme stories of them all being fairy-like or having beards.

As for whether Agnarr's wife fell into the fairy or bearded category, I decline to comment.

I took a sip of my herbal tea and thought about how I should proceed. The Iron Country topic was one close to their hearts, so rather than asking about it immediately, I figured it would be better to have a little bit of friendly chat beforehand to break the ice.

Taking in the unique aroma and bitter taste of the herbal tea, I went with a safe question. "So, Grendir, why did you and your group come here?"

"To die."

A terrible answer came back, and I had a coughing fit, almost spitting out my tea. "Ahem. Sorry."

"Grendir, you will shock him being so blunt," Agnarr said, lightly reproaching him.

Grendir made a troubled face, and went quiet for a while. I sat up straight and waited for him.

He spent some time collecting his thoughts, then started to speak in a composed voice. "We don't have long ahead of us. It is our wish to die gazing at our homeland."

"Sir William, for your information, Grendir is a survivor from the mountains to the west."

Now things made a little more sense. I imagined that once I grew old and my final days approached, I would want to die gazing at the hill where that temple stood.

"The mountains of our old homeland are no longer ours, and the land at the base of the mountain had been transformed into a forest teeming with beasts. But after we heard the rumors that a hero had reclaimed that land..."

But that still didn't mean I'd understood everything Grendir was feeling. I wondered how powerful those feelings must be.

“Looking from afar at our beloved mountain range, dreaming that one day our old home will be taken back. If I can die like that, how happy I would be... We all shared those same feelings with each other, and came here as fellows of similar mind.”

How sad must it be that they were unable to return to their homeland no matter how much they wished for it?

How frustrated must they feel that their homeland was stolen from them and they were never able to take it back?

How much must they have gone through to reach this point, where they could bring themselves to say they'd be happy to die looking from afar at the place that was once their home?

“We will do any job you ask of us. Please, as much trouble as it is, please allow us to stay in some corner of the city.”

I couldn't truly understand the way he was feeling. But for that very reason, as the person in charge of Torch Port, I felt as if I had a duty to make a statement of intent and responsibility.

“Please don't worry. I will do everything I can.” I held one of Grendir's hands with both of mine, looked into his eyes, put feeling into my words, and hoped strongly that he would understand. “*I will* protect you all from injustice.”

“Ohh...” His hand trembled. My eyes shifted to it for a moment, and when I looked back, I saw that tears were streaming down his cheeks. He gripped back with his quivering hand, and said two words, over and over. “Thank you... Thank you...”



Two hundred long years ago, those famous halls of stone known as the Iron Country had a monarch. Short and thin in stature, he was a pensive lord of few words who preferred the art of language to that of fighting. He was the final ruler of the Iron Country, and his name was Aurvangr.

He had inherited the country from the previous monarch and ran the kingdom smoothly, but it was said that the warriors there bemoaned the fact that their new king was beloved not by Blaze, god of fire, but by the god of

knowledge, Enlight.

As for the people, they did not dislike their monarch. He treated both those who could fight and those who could not equally and did not particularly differentiate between them. He understood the feelings of those who were not warriors well.

The warriors, however, were not happy about the fact that they, who stood at the front lines in constant danger and were prepared to sacrifice their lives, were treated the same as those who were not. They furiously bewailed their monarch as they downed their drinks, shouting in outrage with raised fists that he took them too lightly and that his name was the only part of him that was the least bit manly or grand.

The only response the monarch Aurvangr ever gave to these complaints and angry voices was a flustered laugh.

Though there was a small amount of dissent, the kingdom was running well on the whole. It was a peaceful time. The kingdom enjoyed prosperity and was full of happiness, and though there were small misfortunes, there were always people who could afford to lend a helping hand. No one ended their lives by the roadside, angry, suffering, and resenting the world.

But the storm came.

It was a catastrophe, an invasion by hell's demons. The most famous southern countries of the Union Age fell one after another, burned to the ground, and the demonic forces closed in upon the Iron Country.

Though numerous titles existed to refer to that king of demons, there was no one who knew his true name. He was called the Undying Bladefiend, the King Among Kings. The Purest Evil, the Inexhaustible Darkness, the Rider of Warstorms, the Cackler...

The High King of the Eternals.

Their defeat was beyond questioning. The southern kingdoms of Southmark had all been known as powerful countries capable of standing as the first line of defense against the forces of evil, and the High King had toppled them with the ease of tearing thin paper. How many days could they last against such an

enemy, even in the underground halls of the famous Iron Mountains?

Furthermore, the latest word was that there were ancient dragons among the High King's forces, and this news had turned every warrior among them pale and speechless. It was at that time that a messenger came from the demons.

"Will you serve the High King?" the demon said.

He explained that the High King liked swords, and that he could make his own forces but not weapons. Then, he made them an offer, saying that the mountains of iron would be left alone if they could serve him with the skill of their craftsmen. He suggested that if warriors existed to protect the people, accepting his offer would be the right choice.

Saying he would hear their answer in three days, the demon departed, leaving the dwarves behind with bitter looks on their faces.

An explosion of debate followed. A gag order was placed, but the rumor of the demon's message spread in no time at all, and soon everyone was talking about it. In fact, throwing them all into disarray might have been just another part of the demon's plan.

The monarch alone was silent.

The dwarves were an insular people to begin with, and some among them said that if the only difference was going to be who they sold their weapons to, they didn't see the problem. Mothers with infants made pleas as well, saying that their children would die if they were dragged into a war.

The monarch alone was silent.

Of course, there were also many people who insisted that demons could not be trusted and that they should fight to the death. But when it came to how to fight them, everyone had a different opinion and no conclusion could be reached. Everyone was in chaos, and everyone was emotional, screaming, and wailing. There was even bloodshed. No one knew what to do.

The monarch alone was, as always, silent.

And the day came, with the silent monarch's lieges unable to decide on anything. It was then that Aurvangr spoke for the first time.

“I will decide,” he said, and stepped in front of the demon who had returned to hear their response.

“And what is your answer?” the demon said.

“This.” Aurvangr drew his blade across the demon’s neck with lightning speed, lopping his head off. The demon collapsed with a heavy thud.

The enchanted sword Calldawn, passed down in the Iron Country for generations, gleamed with a perfect shine, allowing none of the demon’s blood to taint its surface.

“This is the steel you wanted. The weapon you wanted. And you shall have it!” The small, thin dwarf-lord raised his sword high into the air.

The people cheered. The warriors were choked with tears. Realizing that they had terribly misjudged their monarch, they prostrated themselves in apology and shame for their ignorance.

Then, the fallen demon’s head began to laugh. “The dragon is coming.” It was an ominous, thick voice, and bloody foam spilled from his mouth as he spoke. “The dragon is coming! The dragon is coming! Valacirca! Calamity’s sickle descends upon you!” The demon screamed madly, only the whites of its eyes visible. “Nothing will survive!”

Aurvangr stamped on the demon’s head and crushed it. Then, he muttered. “I won’t let that happen.”



Preparations for battle proceeded quickly. The dwarven warriors surrounded themselves in iron, with helmets, armor, axes, and shields.

“We will draw in hell’s demons and kill them all beneath the earth,” the monarch Aurvangr declared. “Let these underground passages be their graves.”

The people and the warriors all obeyed his words, and made preparations to kill the demons. They set up fiendish traps and complex labyrinths, readying for the demon siege.

They finished in only a few days, and once they were done, Aurvangr gathered them in the great hall and gave them an order.

“All of those who are not warriors, and all warriors who are young and inexperienced: leave the Iron Mountains now.”

When the people heard this, there was an outcry. They had been intending to die with their monarch. Did he think of them as dead weight? They wanted to be allowed to stay.

Despite the din of anger, disappointment, and pleading voices from the crowd, Aurvangr remained quiet. He allowed the people to have their say for a while, and once the roar of the crowd seemed to have lessened, he struck the floor with the end of Calldawn’s scabbard. The sound echoed around, and the din became a murmur.

Having found the right moment to continue, he rested his hands on the end of the sword’s handle, raised his head high, and said, “My people: I am going to die. All the warriors who stay behind will likely die as well.”

Everyone fell silent. Aurvangr’s words were the words of a dying man.

“But we must not permit the death of the Iron Country.” His words were full of quiet determination. “My people: I think of you like my own children, and therefore, it rends my heart to give you such a selfish order. But I must order you regardless: live on!”

The monarch spoke without stopping. “Even if you lose your homeland, and are tarnished with humiliation and regret, I command you to descend the mountain and live on! That is the battle I order of you! You do not run today, you take command over a different battlefield!”

His voice echoed throughout the great hall. “As lord and warriors we shall protect our pride, protect our names, and die in these mountains where the spirits of our ancestors slumber! And you will abandon your pride and put all your being into life! You must never allow the fire of the furnace to die!”

He drew a deep breath, and shouted one more time. “Men, live on! Live and fight! Until we return to glory again! That is my final order!”

Those were the last words the survivors ever heard spoken by the Iron Country’s final ruler.

He took the warriors and left the great hall, and after readying themselves for

their battle, they confronted the tremendous demon army and the ancient dragon without fear. Every one of them fought valiantly, and every one of them died.

The dwarves who went down the mountain and the warriors who were protecting them lost their homeland, and they became a wandering people. They crossed to the north with many refugees, living lives full of suffering and humiliation. But in spite of it all, they grit their teeth, kept the words of their lord in their heart, and for the next two hundred years, some as craftsmen, others as mercenaries, they survived.



“That is our secret, the tale passed down among the people of the Iron Mountains,” said the bald dwarf Agnarr, his face flushed red from alcohol. “I wasn’t born at the time. As for Grendir...”

Grendir, the white-haired dwarf, was crying. It was probably half because he had some strong firewater in him, but even so, he really was a mess of tears.

I had asked them if they would talk to me about their past, and they had quietly nodded and told me their story.

“I... We had only just been appointed warriors to the king at the time...” Grendir snivelled like a child. “We couldn’t even fight beside the warriors who came before us... We just had to obey the order and... run away with the others...” He broke into sobs. Agnarr watched over him uncertainly.

Eventually, he continued. “And that was not easy. It was cold... and too hard a journey for the children... Oh, the children... They kept dying. There was a bright boy, always smiling and urging everyone around him to keep going, and he became increasingly exhausted, until even a smile was more than he could muster... He was a shell of himself, and then a cold was all it took, he stopped moving, even, and... just died. He died on my back as I carried him!”

The long train of refugees suffered random attacks by lone demons. There was dissension over their scarce food supply. And even when they reached a town, there were more of them than the towns could handle. It was the same when they crossed to the north; they were just one group of many in the same situation, and found it very difficult to find jobs.

“I no longer remember how many died. Slurping mud and gnawing on tree roots wasn’t the worst by far. Young women sold their youth for bowls of porridge for their children. Some of the men who couldn’t stand by any longer turned to thievery and were beaten to death for it. We were skin and bone, reduced to begging...”

I quietly listened to him talk and realized that the dwarf-lord’s bravery and the people’s anguish had already brought tears to my eyes.

“And yet we lived... We lived. We overcame that age of chaos and lived through the next two hundred years. Somehow, we lived through...” Grendir spoke quietly. “And then you, William, you returned this land back to the hands of people. Not only that, you even cry with us.”

Grendir gazed up in the direction of the Rust Mountains—no, the Iron Mountains.

“Someday, we’ll be able to go back. Someday, we’ll be able to return it all to the way it was. Someday, we’ll be able to achieve what our ruler ordered...” His voice was shaking. “How precious a thing it is to be able to believe that... How grateful we are...”

As Grendir thanked me over and over, he slowly fell into an alcohol-induced sleep. He had been downing drink after strong drink to help him talk about his painful memories, so it was only natural.

“Grendir must have been happy to bare his heart to someone,” Agnarr said, smiling. “That is our history. I hope you can understand.”

“Thank you so much. That must have been incredibly difficult for you both.”

“You’re welcome.”

There were a few more words to wrap things up, and then I departed Agnarr’s mansion.

I had been so engrossed in their story of the past as we all drank together that I hadn’t noticed how much time had gone by. When I got outside, it was already evening. The dwarves had finished their work and were either returning to their houses or stopping by taverns.

As for me, I was doing a lot of thinking. I thought about those mountains of iron, the dwarves who were left behind, the feelings of the then-monarch Aurvangr. I thought about Blood, Mary, and Gus, who had lived during that time; the fearsome High King; and the Union Age, when the world was prosperous and peaceful. I also thought about the Lord of Holly's prophecy.

And as I walked aimlessly with my thoughts wandering over all these things, it suddenly occurred to me how dark it had gotten. It was already nighttime. Because there weren't many lights here, night was a lot darker in this world than in my past one.

As I stood confused in front of a row of nondescript houses wondering what street I was on, the light from a tavern caught my eye. I decided to walk over. I was sure that if I got a look at the sign hanging outside, I'd at least be able to figure out what street this was. This "city" was small enough for that to work.

Then, I heard some kind of commotion and the sound of someone being punched. Was there a tavern brawl going on? I quickened my pace, and someone came crashing backwards out of the door to the tavern. I hurriedly caught him. His braided black hair fluttered.

"Oh!"

It was that dwarf who had come to see my morning training. He looked like he had been badly beaten.



After catching him, I froze for a second in surprise. He looked surprised as well, but recovered before I could. Ducking a quick bow to me, he went straight back into the fray inside the tavern, yelling out, "Stop this!"

It only took a short glance to tell me most of what I needed to know about what was going on inside. The tavern was a mess of tipped-over tables and chairs, and two male customers, both human, were in there having a fight. They both looked like pretty muscular craftsmen, and their faces were red. They probably had a lot of alcohol in them already.

"Ahh! Stay outta this!"

"This ain't got no'n'a do with you! Bug off!"

The two of them started getting heated, breathing heavily, stinking of booze. The other patrons were either watching from a distance and trying not to get involved, or deliberately fanning the flames from the sidelines. The young tavern girl looked troubled.

“Please, stop, I said!” The dwarf was trying to physically separate the two of them, but he wasn’t very good at it. In fact, he was just getting thumped and shoved away without any effort. I couldn’t really understand it. He looked strong enough to me from where I was standing.

Then it clicked: he wasn’t used to physical fighting. He was timid, and the way he moved showed he was afraid of hurting either of them, which put the craftsmen who were used to fighting and committed to their punches at an obvious advantage.

In this dangerous age, it was unusual to see someone so unused to fighting. With his muscle and physique, the dwarf could just grab hold of one of them and squeeze as hard as he could, and it would be pretty effective.

“You want a fight, I’ll give you a fight!”

“Sto—*pmfh?!?*”

Ouch. That looked like it hurt.

There was a reason, by the way, that I was just standing by and watching: no one had yet drawn any weapons. This wasn’t the peaceful society of my previous world; here, it was the norm for even craftsmen to keep at least a dagger with them on their belts or hidden in an inside pocket. They hadn’t drawn those, and what’s more, they weren’t getting violent against anyone else. In other words, though the people here may have been getting riled up, they were all exercising at least a minimum of restraint by this world’s standards.

“Do it outside, you’re disturbing the other—*gmf!*”

“Just shut your piehole!”

“Butt out already!”

I thought I should probably just watch for a little longer. The dwarf was doing

his best to keep them off each other, after all, and they probably had a reason for fighting. If I, the liege lord, stepped in all of a sudden, it would just make everything into a big deal and—

“Gaaaah—Hey! Hold this guy down for me!”

“Yeah, let’s shut him up. Then it’s back on!”

And then, confusingly, the two who’d been fighting started teaming up. The dwarf kept coming back to stop them no matter how many times they punched him, so it seemed they’d come to an agreement on removing him first. I started to wonder if the two of them weren’t usually on pretty good terms.

“Get down and stay down!”

One of them grabbed him around the neck, while the other started kneeing him repeatedly. I thought this had probably gone far enough now. I didn’t mind when it was just two men fighting each other bare-handed, but I couldn’t stand for them ganging up on someone else.

“Let’s stop now, all right?” I said, stepping into the tavern.

“Huh?! Who as—”

“Not another...”

The two of them turned to look at me and completely froze. Both their mouths hung open. The patrons who had been cheering them on did the same.

“Let’s stop now. I can’t continue to overlook this.”

The color instantly drained from their red faces. See? This is why I wanted to avoid this... Oh well.

“I have no intention of making a big deal out of this. You’ve just had a bit too much to drink, that’s all. Am I right?” I looked each of them in the eye, seeking an answer. They just nodded repeatedly. I wasn’t sure I’d ever seen anyone nod so hard. “Then why don’t you just say sorry to the people here, go home for today, and hit the hay? Don’t worry, I won’t make anything of this.” I smiled.

The two of them cringed—I had no idea why they were so terrified—and started apologizing to the dwarf and tavern girl with incredible energy. The exhilaration and headiness of alcohol felt very empty once you sobered up.

“We caused you all this trouble...”

“Should never’a let the drink get the better’a us!”

Apologizing profusely, they left behind money to compensate the tavern for the trouble they’d caused, and then they cleared off together. So they *had* come here together. They were probably usually good friends.

They left behind them the worn-out dwarf, the stunned barmaid, and the rest of the patrons. Now what was I to do about this...



The dwarf had been hit a few too many times and seemed to be feeling groggy, but he soon came around. Specifically, after I settled everyone down, he came to before I had a chance to cast a resuscitation blessing on him. He was a tough one.

“Oh...” He looked round and round and then, as though grasping the situation, he bolted to his feet. “Tha-Thank you for...!”

“Hold on, hold on.” I stuck my palm out against his forehead and stopped him from bowing. “Your face and head were hit quite a lot. You shouldn’t make sudden movements like quickly standing up or lowering your head.”

“Oh... Okay...”

I explained to him that even when it didn’t look like much, damage to the head could lead to situations that were no joke. He seemed to calm down after that. I got the tavern girl to bring him a chair, and sat him down. “Also, a washcloth, chilled with well water or something, please.”

“Yes, sir!”

I realized there were far fewer patrons here now. It made sense. They’d come to the tavern on the way back from work, planning to gripe and let loose a bit, and were just having a good time watching a fight that had broken out when suddenly the liege lord had wandered in and shut it all down. Anyone who wanted to stay out of trouble would obviously find another place to drink.

I reflected on the trouble I’d caused the place as I spread out a hand in front of the dwarf’s hazel eyes. “How many fingers do you see?”

“Three.”

“All right, that’s good. Do you feel queasy or cold? Any headaches?”

“Nothing.”

“What’s your name?”

He fell silent for a moment, as if deciding what he should say, and then finally spoke. “Al.”

Al wasn’t a very dwarf-like name. They usually sounded rougher and used a lot of voiced consonants. It might have been a nickname or something.

“Al. Okay. You might already know, but I’m William. Nice to meet you.”

“I-It’s very nice to meet you, too.”

He wasn’t having any trouble responding, and I couldn’t see any dangerous symptoms like arm or leg convulsions or non-stop nosebleeds. I’d have to see how things went, but for now he didn’t seem to have any problems. Still...

“I’m amazed there’s so little wrong with you after being punched about and even repeatedly kneed like that.”

“Toughness is my strong point,” the black-haired Al said, smiling.

Benediction wasn’t something to just use whenever I felt like it, so it was always better if regular treatment could do the job. I gave my thanks to the tavern girl and held the wet washcloth against the places where he’d been hit. “One more thing. Where’s the tavern owner? I’d like to apologize for adding to the disturbance.”

“Oh, my father is... laid up at the moment...” The tavern girl broke my gaze and looked at the floor sadly. So that was why this place was so unruly right now.

“Do you want me to take a look at him?”

“I, I would never dream of asking so much of you, sir...!”

Being in a position of importance really was frustrating.

“I don’t mind. My god would be angry with me if I knowingly abandoned a sick person. And a paladin can’t afford to be forsaken by his god; that wouldn’t

even make for a good tragedy in this day and age.” I shrugged jokingly, and the tavern girl’s expression softened as well. “Once he heals up, I would encourage him to pay a visit to a place of worship and make an offering.”

“Y-Yes, of course...!”

“All right, then, Al. I’ll be right back, so please just rest there.” I made my way to the tavern’s living quarters.



The tavern owner’s illness wasn’t that big a deal. It was just a stubborn skin disease. But since it affected how he looked, it was understandable that he couldn’t come into the tavern. He had to consider the impressions it gave the patrons and the rumors that might spread.

I placed my palm against the affected areas and prayed. It cleared up immediately.

“Ohh...”

“Thank you so much... Thank you so much...!”

“The god of the flame gave me this power. So please, show your appreciation to her,” I laughed.

“U-Um, what about... payment or... donations... or...”

“Lots and lots, please.”

“Huh?”

“Lots and lots of appreciation. Give only the money or things you can spare; all I ask is that whatever you give is full of feelings of gratitude for the god of the flame.”

The father and daughter laughed at my bad joke.

This was something Bishop Bagley had told me a long time ago. If you didn’t seek payment for healing people, ultimately, not paying would become the default, and the entire priesthood would feel the squeeze. Sentimentally, I wanted to heal people for free, but priests couldn’t survive on air alone any more than anybody else, so I could see that it was necessary to seek at least a

little in return.

“In that case, why don’t I cook something for you? Right now, if you want!”

“Father’s cooking is really good!”

“Oh, wow, I’d love that. As it happens, I skipped dinner today by accident...”

Once we had a pleasant mood going, we returned to the tavern to find Al repairing the door. Come to think of it, the door broke, didn’t it, when he—

“Wait, what are you doing?!”

“I was bored just sitting around...”

“You’re injured, you’re supposed to be—wow!”

The door and its destroyed latch were now almost completely fixed, despite the fact that he could only have used makeshift materials and tools.

I was seventeen solstice years old now, and I’d been living in this world for sixteen years already. Woodwork and craftsmanship weren’t beyond my understanding and I could even do a bit of them myself, but that was how I could tell.

“Wow...”

His skill was on a different level.

It was only a casual quick fix, but that made the difference in skill even more obvious. In a very short span of time, he had done a beautiful repair job that couldn’t be faulted.

“Ooh!”

“Now that’s something.”

The tavern owner and his daughter were equally impressed.

“No, it’s really nothing... Not compared to you, William...” Al, however, spoke to the floor. “You’re strong and brave and...” It seemed as though he didn’t have much confidence in himself. Because of my memories of my previous life, I could kind of understand how he felt. But that was all the more reason...

“You should stop saying things like that.”

“Huh?”

I squatted down and gazed up at him, looking him in the eyes. As I remembered the way Mary had spoken to me, I realized I was speaking a little more politely than usual. If I’d have been depressed like this, she would probably have said something like...

“Stop jinxing yourself by calling yourself weak and cowardly in a roundabout fashion. Words have *power*. Power to bind people and curse people.”

His hazel eyes wavered hesitantly.

“It’s one thing for an enemy to curse you, but please stop placing such curses on your own heart. Don’t you think that you at least should be your own heart’s biggest ally?”

In my past life, I hadn’t been able to manage that, either, so I wasn’t really one to talk. But despite that, I spoke firmly and with a smile. There were times when it was important to pretend, regardless of what you might or might not have achieved in your past.

“R-Right!”

I was glad to see that Al seemed to be sitting up a little bit straighter.



This world had a type of cooking called jar-boiling, in which all kinds of ingredients were put into a wide-mouthed jar with water, alcohol, salt, herbs, and spices, and brought to a simmer. In essence, it was basically a hotchpotch, but when it was made by someone who was good at it, the delicious, savory taste of the broth, the flavor of the herbs, and the piquancy of the spices all complemented each other perfectly, and it tasted very good.

There was such a jar placed in front of me at this very moment, with a large lid over its wide opening. The tavern girl lifted the lid with a thick cloth, and a wonderful smell swelled out. It was jar-boiled river fish.

“Wow...”

Inside, there was large white fish of the kind that could be reliably caught in the great river flowing beside Torch Port, chopped-up in-season vegetables,

slightly aged wine, rock salt, and herbs, all cooked together into a stew. It came with crusty multigrain bread, a piece of cheese with a distinctive smell which was apparently goat's cheese, and even wine diluted with hot water.

This would be categorized as a top-class meal. Even a main meal of porridge with a few vegetable scraps mixed in and a garnish of some kind of salty preserved food would have counted as "pretty good." While visiting the poor villages of Beast Woods to offer medical treatment, I had often found myself floored by what was offered to me for food. In this area and time period, it was all too common to find food that had abandoned the concepts of nutritional balance and eating for pleasure. It made me appreciate that "cooking" was an art that could only exist upon a foundation of wealth. So I was very grateful for proper meals.

"Mater our Earth-Mother, gods of good virtue, bless this food, which by thy merciful love we are about to receive, and let it sustain us in body and mind." I said grace, the same prayer as usual. It had become a habit by now.

Prayer was a very effective method for changing your mood and putting your thoughts in order. This was something I had only learned after being born into this world.

"For the grace of the gods, we are truly thankful."

Even in my previous life, religion was something that had been passed down continuously for millennia. Anything surviving that long had to have considerable advantages and utility. That much was obvious.

"Cheers." I raised my cup to the black-haired dwarf named Al. Al timidly raised his cup back.

I used a large wooden ladle to serve it out from the jar into earthenware bowls.

"Oh, this *is* good."

The fish fell apart very easily, and the roughly chopped vegetables had absorbed the flavor of the broth. It had a slightly salty taste and went well with alcohol. This was probably the way the laborers liked it.

Al nodded in agreement. He dipped some of the crusty bread into the sauce

and ate it. It looked delicious, so I copied him. It was indeed delicious. I also enjoyed the unique flavor of the cheese. It would have been too pungent on its own, but it was just right paired with the bread.

The two of us ate up the tavern cooking with relish. Al's expression had been quite stiff in the beginning, but the tasty cooking seemed to have mellowed his mood.

A question occurred to me. "Come to think of it, what brought you here to begin with?"

I didn't doubt in the least that he was well intentioned and had only been trying to stop those two from fighting. That was clearly the kind of person he was. But there were a lot of humans in the streets around here. Fortunately, there hadn't yet been any large public clashes between races here in Torch Port, but even so, dwarves and humans had different cultures and led different lifestyles. It was inevitable that the residential areas would end up becoming a little segregated. What had brought a dwarf like him here?

"U-Um, I..."

I nodded and waited patiently while he tried to get his words out.

"I, I only just moved here, and..."

"Go on."

"T-To, ah, get a feel for the place? I guess you'd say, or... umm, I mean..."

Ahh, so he was exploring, I thought, but deliberately didn't say it myself, instead nodding for him to continue.

"Something like... exploring..." He seemed to shrink back into his chair as he said it.

"There's nothing very strange about that, if you ask me. It's necessary, right?"

"Yes..."

This city had its share of nasty people, but I paid attention, and Reystov and company also kept watchful eyes out, so no one dared to start anything big in public areas like the main streets. And since no major trouble would start just from walking around, it was relatively important to do that first of all and

become familiar with the area. Obviously, this world didn't have public transport, detailed city maps, traffic signs, or house numbers on display. Unless you walked around on your own two feet for a while taking in everything you saw, you really wouldn't know your way around.

Al might have been peering at my morning training not just because he was interested in it, but also to make sure he knew the location of the liege's mansion.

"The clan is busy trying to smooth everything out, but it's still..."

"Oh, you mean Grendir?"

"Oh, um, yes."

"Don't worry about that. We have it mostly organized."

I hadn't only been listening to their old war stories. Agnarr and I had also made progress on dividing up the residential areas, lending out what was needed to get by for now, and organizing the amount of people who wanted to migrate here and their various skills.

I told Al that in any case, there was no need for him to worry, and he looked at me with eyes full of all kinds of emotions. They were eyes that looked up from below, as a child on the street might look up to an adult, and they were full of envy, respect, admiration, and probably a little self-deprecation and submissiveness.

"You're amazing."

I recognized those eyes somehow. I had probably looked just like this in my previous life. That was probably why.

"You're strong, dependable, you can even manage other people. Seriously, compared to me..."

"Well, why don't you give it a go yourself?"

"Huh?"

I couldn't help it anymore. I had to do something for him. "You can reach a certain level of strength just by eating and training. Seeming dependable is all down to how you act and building confidence through experience. And you

naturally learn how to manage other people when you have enough experience interacting with them.”

All a person needs to gain those things is an average body, an average brain, and a little bit of strength to act on their desires. That was the case both in my past world and in this one. If a person is unable to gain those things, it's often the case that their motivation is broken, or *has been* broken. Some event may have broken them down. It can happen to anyone.

Going by the information I could remember, I seemed to have received a reasonable education in my past life, and I had been doing well up until a certain point, ambitious in my own way. I couldn't remember where I'd broken or been broken, but there are often other factors besides willpower, ability, and talent that play a part in things like this.

For instance, one's environment and luck. Even the most determined and talented person, if they are unlucky enough to be cast into a hostile, cruel, negative environment, can be knocked down and beaten until broken. And whether they can recover from that is entirely up to the whims of fate.

Life is not always wonderful. Not everything in life is beautiful, nor is it good. There are people who love to put others down and make them suffer. If you look for the reason they became so twisted, you will find a second perpetrator, and if you look for the reason that perpetrator became twisted, you will find a third. I had learned through leaving the city of the dead that even deplorability like that was simply part of the reality of this world.

I now found it understandable that the god of death, Stagnate, had come out with the idea of a paradise for only the most distinguished of undead. Of course, “it's understandable” was as far as I could go. Faced with the question of whether I could *accept* it or not, the answer was no, I could not, and I'd decided I wouldn't. Which was why—

“It must be some kind of fate that I met you here. If you're willing, Al, would you consider assisting me by becoming my squire for a while?”

As one who had decided not to accept the god of undeath's ideals, I felt as though I had a duty to make sure the way I lived was equally principled. For instance, by not saying goodbye here and instead offering a helping hand to a

person on the verge of giving up.

Al avoided my gaze, looking at the hand offered to him.

“D-Do you really... mean it...?”

I nodded and smiled at him.

Even though I’d made the offer with the best of intentions, there was no guarantee that he’d take it. Trust was something to be gradually fostered, and helping people took patient, steady effort. It was much rarer that one could just come up with an idea and have everything sort itself out at the snap of a finger. Even if I couldn’t get him to be receptive to my suggestion now, I thought I’d like to build up a friendship with him while I kept my arm patiently extended.

“Don’t worry, I’m not just saying it. After all, sorcerers are free to change the subject or remain silent, but lying is the one thing they must never do.”

“Ah... I think I’ve... heard that before...”

“Yes. It’s true. And I’m also a user of magic.”

According to Gus, if a sorcerer lied, the power his Words held would be weakened. Words could carry different weight depending on who used them, and could be blunt or sharp. The Words of a liar accustomed to telling falsehoods would lose both their weight and their edge as time went on. That was why, even though magic was something that could be studied and practiced, only a handful of people were capable of becoming great sorcerers.

“So I don’t lie. If you have some kind of ambition, and you want to try doing something about it, I want to help you.”

Al was silent for a while. He sheepishly extended his hand, then pulled it back. “I might... cause you a lot of trouble...” He breathed in deeply. “But please teach me.”

He took my hand.



Not only was Al a recent migrant here with no sense of where anything was, it was also nighttime. So for the time being, I decided to help him back to Dwarftown.

When I got there, there was a bit of a commotion going on. As I got closer, wondering what this was about, I saw a frenzied group of dwarves, each of whom was carrying a light. They noticed Al and their faces changed color.

“Young master!” They rushed up to him noisily.

“Where in the world have you been?!”

“You have to tell us where you’re going!”

“We were all so worried...”

These and other comments pelted Al like machine-gun fire. I could tell that they’d all been worried for him, but they seemed to be making his head spin.

“In any event, I’m glad you’re safe!”

“I, I’m sorry!”

Ahhh. Yeah. Yeah. I got the feeling I understood Al’s upbringing and his problem. I had no idea how important Al was, but he was probably descended from dwarven nobility.

Based on the old stories I’d heard from the dwarves, their most ardent desire was the revival of the Iron Country. They wanted to take back their lost homeland. Of course, I thought that was a good thing. The noble bloodline was also one of the integral components in achieving that, so I could understand them not wanting to lose it.

But in Al’s case, that attitude seemed to be toxic. I figured he was more or less an adult now, yet simply going out on his own to check out the city and coming home late was enough to create a big fuss. He had probably been protected to such an extent that he had never had a proper fight before and had been raised with care, a lot of care, too much care.

I didn’t think of him as a spoiled rich boy brought up under the protection of adults.

I remembered from my previous life. I had read it at some point. I knew. *Overprotection and excessive interference are forms of abuse.*

Don’t do that. Don’t do this. You should do *this*. You should do *that*. The correct decision to make is *this* one. How many children manage to develop

decisiveness, action, and willpower when everything involving them is decided by others like that? I understood the reason why he'd shrunk into his chair when he told me he went exploring: he was being raised in an environment where even that wasn't allowed as it should have been.

"Anyway, please, don't do this kind of thing anymore," one of the dwarves said, trying to wrap up the discussion.

Wearing an expression that kind of showed he was feeling smothered, Al went to nod.

"Excuse me," I said.

This was a family problem and none of my business, but I didn't want to see how Al would end up in the future if things continued as they were. Even though it may have been a bit headstrong of me, I thought that this alone was a good enough reason for chiming in.

"My name is William G. Maryblood." I placed my right hand lightly over the left side of my chest and did a simple, traditional bow, purposefully choosing the one for greeting those of lower rank.

There were many older dwarves among them. My name and my gesture quickly tipped them off, and they hurriedly responded with the bow for greeting a superior.

"First, I would like to apologize. I happened to meet Mister Al in town, and the two of us hit it off. I'm afraid I kept him talking until quite late."

"N-No, that's all right!"

I could hear whispers from the back and words like "liege" and "paladin." I also saw a number of people trying to get a measure of my strength by sight, so I made no attempt to conceal it through my stance or movements. I made sure to present myself as strong.

"It's really him."

"Horrifically strong."

The whispers continued. A dwarf with a plainly visible scar on his face warned the others with a heavy air. "More than that. All of us put together wouldn't

stand a chance against him. We'd be crushed."

I, uh, I wasn't sure I'd go that far. If everyone here suddenly turned on me, I could see myself hesitating about how to deal with it and making a wrong move.

As many of the other dwarves went pale upon hearing his words, the dwarf with the scarred face pushed through them and stood before me. "My name is Ghelreis. I would like to express our acceptance of your apology regarding the young master, and our deepest gratitude for your concern." He cast a hard look over me. He had the eyes of a soldier. "Well, then, what business do you have with us?"

"I wish to take Mister Al as my squire."

A murmur rose among the dwarves.



"You say you want the young master... as your *squire*?"

"But..."

"But that's..."

The murmurs spread, and some people started to raise their voices.

"Master, being the paladin's squire would be terribly dangerous!"

"You'd be taken along on beast hunts!"

"I beg you to reconsider!"

I looked at Al. He looked as if he didn't know where to turn, and his forehead was damp with sweat.

"I think you had better spend a night slowly thinking this over."

"That's right. We'll all talk about it together."

Al went pale as they kept on pressing him. I could see he was about to nod. It was probably almost a reflex by now.

So I asked simply, "What do *you* want to do?"

Al's eyes opened wide and his pupils trembled slightly, as if the voices all

around him were making him hesitate. Then he pressed his lips into a hard line.

“I...” He forced the words out. “I want to study under this man!” His voice carried surprisingly well, enough that all the other dwarves, taken aback by his sudden outburst, fell silent. “I want to know what makes a warrior, what bravery is! I want to grasp the answer for myself, with my own hands!” His words were filled with a heat like fire. “Without exposing myself to danger, without taking a step forward on my own, what of warriors can I learn?! What of bravery can I learn?!”

Al pulled himself up straight, his braided black hair bouncing as he did. A scorching light dwelt in his wide-open hazel eyes. “I want to be one who feels no shame in who I am, not before the great spirits of our ancestors nor before the gods who created us! How can I claim to be a dwarf without knowing of battle, valor, and chivalry?! I have no intention of changing my mind!”

Al’s lone shouting overwhelmed the burly mountain-folk. I was amazed. To be honest, I never expected him to be able to say it so clearly. He was more amazing than I thought.

“Sir Will! I would like you to make me your squire here and now!” Al ran up to me, got down on one knee, clasped his hands together, and held them up to me. I heard Blood’s voice in the back of my mind.

— *In the way of the warrior, clasping both your hands together and presenting them to another is a symbol of offering your “sincerity.” If a warrior offers you his sincerity, you have two choices: you either reject it, or you accept it by wrapping both your hands around theirs. Don’t do it lightly. Accepting a warrior’s sincerity is serious business.*

It was night in the temple. Blue will-o’-the-wisps inhabited his vacant eye sockets. His skeletal jaw clacked audibly as he grinned.

— *What does it mean? Well...*

“The sincerity thou hast offered—” I took his fervent hands and wrapped mine around them. “I shall protect by mine own hands.”

When we finished our atypical handshake and Al looked up at me, his expression, which had been stiff and anxious with tension and heady emotion,

relaxed with relief.

“That’s not the full ceremony, but all the same, I have accepted Al’s oath to become my squire. As his knight and master, I will now take your questions.” Clapping Al on the shoulder a couple times, I looked around at the dwarves. “I would also like to ask a question of all of you. Is my name insufficient to be his master, even if this is only temporary?”

A squire was not that low a status to hold in this day and age. There were even some members of the royal family and sons of nobility who, in order to add to their own prestige, served as squires of knights noted for their military and moral excellence.

In terms of the Kingdom, I was the feudal lord ruling over a faraway piece of land, and a retainer’s retainer. Specifically, I was a retainer of Ethelbald, Duke of Southmark, who was himself a retainer of King Owen. So, I wasn’t *that* high in the social order. But all the same, I had made names for myself and was well known as the Wyvern Killer, the Beast Killer, the Torchbearer, and the Faraway Paladin, among others. Whatever status Al had among the dwarves, I was confident that I had achieved enough that he shouldn’t feel ashamed to work for me.

The dwarves answered my question with hums and murmurs, stuck for an answer. Then Ghelreis muttered solemnly, “It is not for us to argue.”

“You *accept* this, Ghelreis?” another dwarf replied.

“The young master wills it.”

“But—”

“The young master,” Ghelreis repeated, “who has been considerate to our hardships and never once insisted upon his own way since childhood *wills it*.”

The dwarves who had been trying to argue back said nothing further.

“Young master, I will find a way to tell Grendir.”

“Th-Thank you, Ghelreis.”

“However—” Ghelreis turned a hard stare on Al, who twitched. “I will think of you as having died this day.”

“I...”

“Now that you have placed your sincerity in the hands of a superior warrior, never treat your life as something too precious to lose. Serve him well and be prepared to die without hesitation if that is called for.” The dwarf with the scar spoke to Al with a stern expression. The tension in his words made Al’s expression tighten as well. “Are we agreed?”

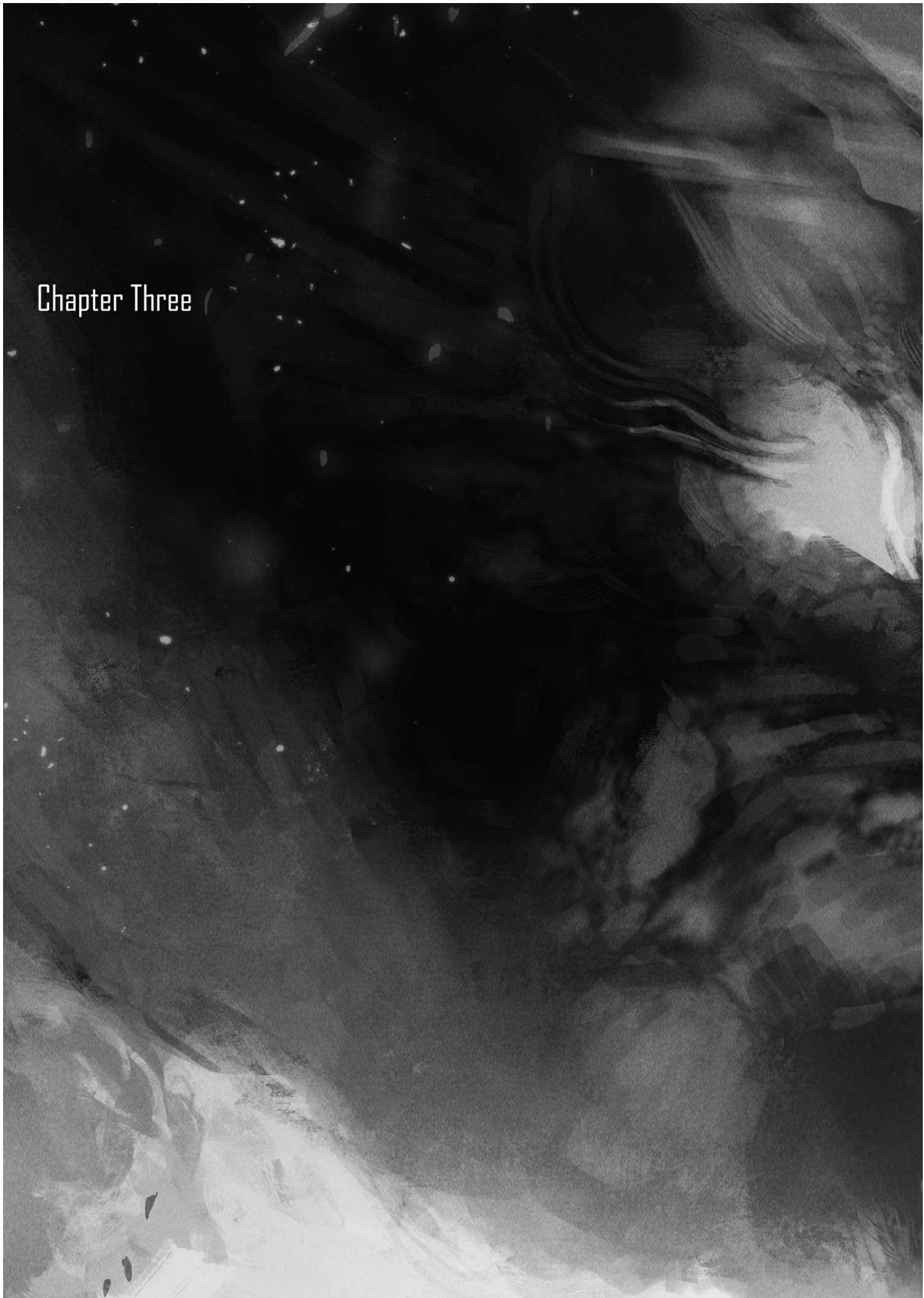


“I understand!”

Ghelreis looked at me. “Grendir and I will pay you a visit in the near future. The young master is in your hands.”

“I hear you loud and clear,” I answered, and the dwarf’s scar creased as he smiled gracelessly. It was the smile of a warrior, and it reminded me of Blood.

Chapter Three



The black-haired dwarf Al became my squire, and Grendir paid us a formal visit a few days later. Good to his word, Ghelreis seemed to have persuaded him.

“Uhh, so, Al,” I said. “Squires are often asked to cover for their own expenses, but I will be providing your equipment and also paying you a wage.”

“A-Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“It’s not a question of minding. I can’t go taking money from the dwarves who moved here right now. They’d see me as a heartless monster.” Many of them still didn’t even have a reliable way of supporting themselves. There was no way I could take money from them. “So let’s talk about how much to pay you.”

“Huh? Uhm... If I can serve you, that’s... enough for...”

“No.”

“O-Okay.”

“One thing that a certain person I know always told me is that money is important. Hmm, let’s see. Taking on a squire isn’t quite like hiring a servant, for example, but—”

“Right.”

“If I don’t pay you or you don’t accept payment, that can be taken as your work, your ‘sincerity,’ not having any value.”

He didn’t reply.

“It might not be very classy to put a price on everything, but it’s what everyone looks at, so I want to make sure I don’t cut any corners where money is concerned.” I spoke with finality, thinking that Gus would probably say the exact same thing.

“You’re so adult.”

“I’m just trying hard to grow up.”

We decided upon his pay and the other details of the arrangement. He would live in my mansion and work for me, and join in with my morning training. After

that, I started to think about what I'd teach him first, which caused me some hesitation.

"All right, once more around!"

Al followed behind me, panting as we ran laps of the city.

Now that I thought about it, I had never taken a pupil before and had no experience in teaching. I tried remembering what I'd been taught by Blood, but there were a lot of differences between me, who had begun learning as a child, and Al, who already had a grown body. In what way and in what order was I supposed to teach him things like how to fight and how to be a warrior, and how could I get them to stick?

Very soon after beginning to consider these things, I felt a renewed appreciation for Blood, Mary, and Gus. They had taught me their own skills as if there was nothing to it, but now I wondered how much planning had gone on behind the scenes to get me to absorb so many things so efficiently. Which should be taught first, footwork or stance? Standing here in the shoes of a teacher, I realized that even seemingly insignificant decisions like these had logic and planning behind them.

"Almost there! Push yourself!" I ran just ahead of him to encourage him. He was sprinting his heart out and almost collapsing from exhaustion, but he was still fighting to keep up.

Teaching was making me realize just how far I still was from the place my parents had reached. But one day, I was sure, I'd catch up to them.

"Good work! Walk around for a bit to get your breath back, and we'll move on to muscle training!"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

"In a battle, muscular strength is the foundation upon which everything else rests. In the words of my mentor, 'Get ripped, and you can solve pretty much everything by force!'"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

So I could stand shoulder to shoulder with those three, so I could tell them

with a smile how far I'd come, and so I could do justice to the sincerity Al had offered me, I vowed to do my utmost.



Now then. It bears repeating that what that was expected from me was the military might to guarantee the region's safety and for me to use my title of paladin to stand in front of His Excellency and represent the area. So I was providing my squire Al with a warrior's education as well, hoping first of all for him to become physically strong. The woodlands around here were dangerous, and I regularly set foot in the most perilous parts of them and fought against innumerable dangers. If he couldn't protect himself, he would be useless.

Al aside, however, you might ask if I wasn't doing anything remotely resembling the activities of a feudal lord, which is a separate question worth answering.

There was a little bit of a gathering that day.

Because of the Fertile Kingdom's Southmark expansion policy, people from many areas of the northern continent of Grassland were coming to settle here.

For example, the cook in that mutton place in Whitesails was from Arid Climate in the northeast. Reystov, I suspected based on his external characteristics and his imposing yet quiet bearing, was probably born somewhere even further north on the northern continent, probably around the Ice Mountains. Ethel and Bishop Bagley, of course, had come from the original Fertile Kingdom and specifically its capital, Ilia's Tear.

Many others came from the Allied Kingdoms, a federation of small-and medium-sized kingdoms to the west of Fertile, or from the Hundred Warring Kingdoms in the southeast, which was still a conflict zone where warlords fought for power. Still more came from the islands dotted around Middle-sea, from large forests all over that were home to the elves, from the dwarven mountains, and from even farther away than that. There were also wanderers like Bee the troubadour, who had no singular home at all to speak of and traveled from place to place.

Torch Port really was home to all kinds of people, and they tended to live in concentrated areas with others from the same country or cultural sphere, so

every street and section of the city had its own personality.

On the other hand, the fact that each individual part had its own personality was also a source of conflict. Gestures carried different meanings in different cultures, certain expressions could be taken as serious insults, disagreements could arise in contracts and payments as a result of the two sides having different business customs. And in some cases, things couldn't even get that far because the groups couldn't understand each other's language to begin with.

So yes, there was trouble, and all kinds of it. Early on had been the worst. There was even one time when an argument became magnified, people standing up for one side led to more standing up for the other, and the situation escalated into almost becoming a battle between multiple groups in the middle of town, their families and friends behind them. Menel, Reystov, and I settled things down by force before they got serious, but it just served to underline how scary differences in culture really were.

If you let these kinds of things go, the turmoil would only get worse, so after consulting with the priests, I also created a variety of rules and penalties that would apply only within the city. I established rules to observe when selling, rules to observe when using the boats and port, and a rule for when problems arose; that one said to make your case with logic and reason to the feudal lord or one of the priests who worked for him and await instructions. They also laid out what kind of punishment you would receive if you ignored this process and started a disturbance or joined in with one and escalated it, among other things.

The experience made me realize that the ancient laws of my past world that placed equal culpability on both parties in the case of a fight had been made for a good reason. It also made me think of the struggles faced by Ethel, who ruled over the larger city of Whitesails, and Bishop Bagley, who ran the main temple there.

In any case, in addition to the firm-handed approach of rules and punishments, some softer touches were also required. One of these was to set up regular gatherings where representatives of each group would meet and talk. I had been trying to show up as much as possible, and that day, I left Al's training to Menel so I could take part. I heard all kinds of different opinions and

noted them down. We talked from late morning until the afternoon, with a break for lunch in the middle.

After we broke up, I made my way to a certain tavern. It was the one where I had talked with Al. I just wanted to check that there hadn't been any particular problems after the incident and that the owner's illness hadn't flared up again. It had only been a minor illness, so I didn't expect a problem, but illnesses that had their roots in lifestyle or nutrition problems sometimes recurred easily, even after I cured them with benediction. Neither prayer nor miracles were all-powerful.

"Okay, so..."

The "feudal lord walking in during business hours incident" wasn't something I was keen to repeat, so I made sure that the sign hanging on the door did read "Closed." I could hear talking going on inside, so I went to knock on the door, but before I could—

"I'm sorry to spring this on you. Thank you very much!"

"Not at all. Consider it done."

The door swung open in front of me.

"Oh!" My eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"Oh my! It's you, sir!" The tavern girl had her hand over her mouth and was looking at me in surprise from behind the dwarf who had opened the door.

"Good afternoon," he said.

At the door to the tavern, I had run straight into the dwarf with the scar, Ghelreis.



The tavern owner's illness seemed to have completely cleared up, and he showed no signs of another flare-up. They invited me to stay awhile, but I said I couldn't inconvenience them while they were busy preparing to open for the evening, and I took my leave immediately, with Ghelreis walking down the street beside me. We were headed the same way.

Neither of us was saying a word.

Ghelreis, like most dwarves, didn't speak much, and he had quite a harsh air about him that made it difficult to start up a conversation with him. But the silence was worse; I couldn't bear it. I brought up a topic.

"What brought you to the tavern today, Ghelreis?"

"They have a reservation for a large party or something in about ten days. They hired me to procure a decent amount of beast flesh."

"So you hunt for a living?"

"No. I'm a kind of mercenary, hired muscle. But I happen to have a little skill with crossbows and traps as well, you see—"

"It's something like a side job, then?"

"That would be a fair description."

Once I actually tried talking to him, I found he was a surprisingly eloquent speaker. So he was a mercenary, a warrior for hire. That was the same job Blood had. The old scar on his face had clearly been made by a sword, so it made a lot of sense.

We walked down the street in the glittering afternoon sunlight. The faint clanging of hammers reached us from some distant workshop. Different groups of people enjoying their own conversations passed us by. Every so often, one of them would notice me and acknowledge me with a nod or a bow.

"It's a good town," Ghelreis said. "It's almost unimaginable how quickly it's developed, considering that it was only built a few years ago."

"Yes. It couldn't have been done without all the help we received from all kinds of people."

Ghelreis nodded. Then silence fell again. This time, it wasn't so suffocating.

"Paladin," Ghelreis started.

"Yes?"

"I was once a warrior who served the Iron Country." He spoke quietly, wearing a calm expression as he walked beside me. "At the time, I was still inexperienced as a warrior and was not permitted to die with our lord. I held to

his last wishes and protected the people who had been left behind. I earned my daily bread by taking up my weapon and fighting for whoever would hire me.”

I remained quiet and listened.

“It isn’t easy to find a place to live in peace. We wandered across many lands to make it here.” Despite how quietly he was speaking, lots of different emotions showed in his voice. I thought I could sense them churning inside him.

“Please, guide the young master well.”

“I will.” I stopped walking, looked at him with a serious expression, and placed my fist against my heart. “By the flame.”



A line of sweat ran down my neck. Al and I were locked in a grapple on the grass in my yard. Menel was watching us from the sidelines.

After a lot of thought, I’d decided that the next thing to teach Al after the fundamentals was grappling. Al had a naturally good physique, and appeared to have muscle strength, too, despite the fact that he hadn’t had any training. Maybe that was just the nature of dwarves. My idea had been to begin by teaching him grappling moves, where muscle power had an especially large influence, so that he could gain confidence in his own abilities.

But I hadn’t been expecting this. I was somewhat stronger than him, but even though I was pulling him towards me with all my strength, he was starting to resist me. In a simple push-and-pull exercise, he was holding his ground to a certain extent. He was showing astonishing muscle strength and intuition considering that he hadn’t received any specialist training. There was no other way to say it: he had a natural talent for this.

I understood the reason why he’d been hesitant to hit or grab anyone before. With this extraordinary level of natural muscle strength, it wasn’t surprising he’d developed an attitude like that. In fact, he might actually have injured someone unintentionally at some point in his past, or at least come close to doing so.

“Al.” I spoke casually, deliberately not letting any strain or effort show in my expression. “Is this your full strength?”

He grunted and pushed harder. My whole body groaned under his tremendous power, but I resisted and pushed back. The body Blood and I had forged together wasn't so puny that it couldn't handle this.

"I think you've got more," I said.

He whined.

I needed him to know it was okay for him to go all out, to be more savage. That was probably what had to come first for him.

"If this is all you've got..." I dropped my hips and pushed forward with all my might.

"Wh-Whoa!" Al started sliding backwards, his feet leaving marks in the grass as he tried to press his weight into the ground.

"I can overpower you. I'm stronger."

So it's okay for you to go a little more wild. It's okay for you to use all the strength you've got. As I spoke those words to him inside my heart, I maneuvered my body and pulled close to him, then lifted him up and threw him on the ground as hard as I could. I kept my grip on his collar to make sure he at least didn't hit his head. He made a sound like the wind had been knocked out of him.

"Sorry, Al," I said. "You lose."

My general rule was to hold nothing back when it came to this side of things. Getting used to pain was a part of training, and I had to approach this prepared for him to hate me. I didn't feel good about it, though.

"Ho—"

"Hm?"

"How do you do the move you just did?!" Al asked me with sparkling eyes, leaping to his feet immediately. Even though I was forcing him to run for ages, throwing him about, and making him go through stuff that was pretty painful and hard to endure, he showed absolutely no sign of giving in. He really was persistent and eager.

"That one?" I hummed in thought. "Menel, come here a sec."

“What am I, your punching bag?”

“It’s easier to get the idea looking from the side. Please.”

“S-Sorry about this!”

Menel tutted. “Fine. You better give me a clean throw, you got it?! A *clean* throw!”

I wondered if the day Al became a warrior might come sooner than I expected.



Training in magic in this world was similar at times to training in acting and calligraphy. To speak the Words, it was necessary to enunciate them precisely in terms of both pronunciation and volume, so vocal training was mandatory. Similarly, to use the characters—that is, the Signs—it was necessary to write them precisely, so penmanship practice was a requirement.

As a result, a sorcerer’s handwriting was naturally beautiful. I had heard that sorcerers who worked for powerful figures often served a second job as their scribe. I was no exception to this rule; Gus’s tough education had made sure that I could write quite beautifully.

I was in my office.

My quill, made from a beast feather, slowly traveled from left to right across the paper as I carefully wrote down the concise and formal message that I’d come up with in advance. I was using the very best quality paper I could get my hands on, and the same for the ink.

I finished writing and used some sand to absorb the excess ink. After folding the paper neatly in thirds to hide the text, I folded it again in thirds horizontally and prepared to apply the seal.

I slightly warmed some scarlet wax over a flame, dripped it onto the paper and sealed it, and then pressed the signet ring I’d made just last year onto the wax. It left behind a symbol of a flame shining on a ring of fate inside a shield. It was my family insignia, the crest of Maryblood. I’d had quite a few ideas for it, but ultimately I’d settled on a “ring and flame” symbol for Gracefeel, and a

“shield” symbol to represent a knight.

Lastly, I made sure that the front had both my signature and the name of the recipient: Bishop Bart Bagley.

“Good.”

The letter contained a request for Bishop Bagley to search the libraries for some information for me.

I thought back on those words that the Lord of Holly had spoken in his domain in the woods.

— *The fire of dark disaster shall catch in the mountains of rust. That fire shall spread, and this land may all be consumed. That land is now a den of demons, wherein the great lord of miasma and wicked flame slumbereth upon the mountain people’s gold.*

And then there was what I’d heard from the dwarves.

— *The dragon is coming. The dragon is coming! The dragon is coming! Valacirca! Calamity’s sickle descends upon you!*

Based on what I knew now, I needed to have some research done in the temples and the Academy where the sorcerers assembled. After all, I was going to be up against a formidable opponent.

If “the fire of disaster” and “the lord of miasma and wicked flame” in the Rust Mountains had been a General-ranked demon, I would have been confident that I could scrape out a victory. Even if he had followers with him, I could manage something. I had built up enough experience over the last two years that I could say that for sure. And even if the worst came to the worst and it all looked hopeless, I still had my trump card, Overeater. As long as I didn’t make a mistake and get killed out of nowhere—and of course that was always a possibility in any battle—I could win against a General. But...

“Valacirca.”

If I remembered correctly, it was an Elvish word that referred to the Northern Sickle, a constellation made up of six stars. It consisted of two stars connected like a handle and four curved like a blade. Each of those stars had the name of

one of the six main gods: the god of lightning, the Earth-Mother, and the gods of fire, fae, wind, and knowledge.

“Calamity’s sickle, the sickle of the gods—”

And the name of a dragon.

This dragon was feared enough to have earned that big of a name from the proud race of the elves. I was certain that it had to be a dragon in the true sense of the word, and it must have existed since time immemorial.

I’d never fought a dragon. They hadn’t even turned up in Blood’s heroic stories. So it was virtually impossible for me to even guess at their strength or my chances of winning.

Born at the time the Progenitor created the world, the dragons had wielded their power in the battles between the good and evil gods, power that was said to be unmatched by any except the gods themselves. They had huge, supple bodies covered in tough scales, and they possessed the innate intelligence to manipulate Words. They had strong wings to catch the wind, fangs as thick as trees, and claws as sharp as the finest blades.

Most of them had now vanished from the world. There was one theory that it was because the battles between the gods had reduced their numbers too severely, and another that they had left the confines of the physical world behind and ascended to the dimension of the gods. Whatever the truth of these theories, the fact of the matter was that there were hardly any dragons left in this world. Only the many ornate legends about them and the various demidragons that were said to have been their minions long ago were left as proof that the dragons had once existed.

“A dragon...”

To repeat: *their power was second only to the gods*. Even the Echo of Stagnate had been hopelessly dangerous, and that was after Gus had destroyed one half of his physical body and probably put him in a weakened state. He had brought me to the brink of death. If the goddess of the flame hadn’t come to my rescue, I would have died then and there. I remembered the terror the god of undeath had made me feel. A shiver ran down my spine.

“An Echo and a dragon...”

Which was stronger? I didn't know. But I was certain of one thing: there was no chance at all of a dragon being significantly weaker than Stagnate.

I wanted to be extremely cautious. That was why I'd decided to send a request to the bishop to see if he could find out anything that could help me while I still had time to spare. All kinds of books and a lot of talented people were collected at the temple and the Academy to which Gus had once belonged. Apparently, the temple and Academy even had the occasional elf who had left the forest in search of knowledge sign up. There was a chance that some old oral lore would turn up.

I breathed out slowly to calm myself down.

I took a little bit of pride in my strength—I was a man, after all, and a warrior trained by Blood. But at the same time, there was something I'd learned from all the battles I'd fought. Battles represented reality at its most cruel, treacherous, and unforgiving. Once one started, it was almost inevitable that someone would die.

“God...”

My hands were shaking for the first time in a while. This was an opponent who was at least my equal and probably stronger. There was a serious likelihood I could lose. It was an opponent who would probably steal away my life with heartless brutality.

“Oh, man...”

I found myself thinking about Mary. I remembered her hugs and the pleasant smell of fragrant wood burning. *Will. William.* I heard her voice, my mom's voice, calling my name.

I murmured quietly. “I'm scared...”

“Don't be so feckin' gutless!”

I jumped. I was sure someone had heard me.

“Come on! Again!”

The voice was coming from outside the window. I looked out. Menel and Al

were having a mock battle.



“Hah!” Wearing armor and holding the practice sword I had made in his hands, Menel effortlessly kicked Al over. “What’re you doing hesitating to hit me when I’ve got armor on? You’re more of a softy than Will. A pushover!” Menel provoked Al and frowned down at the dwarf as he lay on the ground groaning. “Come on, what’s wrong? Giving up already? Gonna turn tail and run home, rich boy?”

“I, I’m not giving up!”

Al attacked him again with his practice sword. Menel didn’t even dodge. He allowed the sword to come straight down onto his forehead guard and didn’t so much as blink as the thud rang out.

“Brother, you’re hitting me square from the front and that’s all you’ve got? Are those thick arms just for decoration? Huh?” With the sword still resting on his head, Menel edged up to Al and glared at him. Al winced. “Oh? Oh? Cowering, huh? Just gonna cry and run away? Go on then.”

“I, I’m not going to run!”

“Then hit harder! Put some power into it, you loser!”

Al let out a wild yell and swung his practice sword about with all his might. Menel took the blows skillfully on his armor, but those impacts looked pretty heavy even with armor to block them. I was impressed that he wasn’t showing even a hint of pain.

Recently, Menel had been taking over the role of the strict coach for Al’s training.

Al was just too gentle. He had a lot of muscle power and showed good intuition when it came to learning technique, but when it came to actually hitting Menel with the practice sword or grappling, he would get beaten and thrown, even though I knew Menel had less muscle.

For a person, having the kindness to feel sympathy and be hesitant to hurt anyone was a virtue that couldn’t be faulted, but for a warrior, it was nothing

other than a weakness. I'd discussed this with Menel, and we had concluded that the only way forward was to make the motions a matter of muscle memory. And so, Menel was being offensive towards Al, kicking him over, and pressuring him with an intense focus on making him strike back. Just as I'd been trained to get used to killing birds and other wild animals, getting used to very stressful battle situations and striking living opponents with all his strength had to be the first steps for Al.

Al yelled out again. There was a tremendous crash, followed by a brief choking sound. Al had swept his practice sword horizontally and smashed it into Menel, knocking him back despite the chestplate armor he was wearing. That must have hurt. That seriously must have hurt.

"Heh. You were pretty fired up that time." Menel didn't let the pain show on his face. He just furrowed his brow a little and forcibly kept a calm expression. "That's the way."

Menel was doing a really good job of being a teacher. He was actually a caring person who had a lot of life experience. Perhaps he was even more suited to teaching than me.

"Th-Thank you very much!"

And Al was earnest. Even though he sometimes flinched or held back out of concern for his opponent, he never allowed Menel to break his spirit despite all the shouting, intimidation, and pressure. His hazel eyes sparkling, he yelled out a battle cry and charged at Menel, a warrior overwhelmingly stronger than himself.

Al was really impressing me. I could see that he was getting slightly stronger with every battle. What he couldn't do one day, he would be able to do by the next. And what he couldn't do the next day, he would be able to do the day after that. They were all little changes. Sometimes he would put his effort into the wrong thing and lose some ground for a little while. But what if he kept making those little improvements for ten whole days? What about twenty? Thirty? Fifty? A hundred? A thousand? What if he never stopped at all?

Warriors aren't warriors because they're born that way. They *become* warriors by making mistakes, getting injured, and learning from it, making the

smallest of improvements many times over.

Below my window, Menel kicked Al over again. He rolled on the ground, completely covered in dirt. But to me, he looked like he was shining like a gemstone. He had the irregular gleam of a rock that was yet to fall into human hands. He was going to be cut and polished, and I was sure that he would shine even more beautifully. The thought of it somehow calmed my worries a little, and I felt warm inside.

Blood... Were there times when you felt like this?



When lunchtime came around, Al sat in the dining room drained of all his strength. Menel had driven him hard for what must have felt like forever.

Menel was really something to have robbed someone as persistent as Al of all his stamina. That said, it seemed to have taken a lot out of him, too. Apparently he didn't want to appear weak in front of the person he was teaching; he told me he was going to eat out and asked me to deal with Al, then staggered off to town. He reminded me of a wild animal or something. Maybe that was just what he was always like.

"Food's up." On the table, I placed deep bowls full of the vegetable and smoked meat soup my housemaids had made during their morning visit, followed by a plate of boiled eggs and bread that was more stodgy than fluffy and light. There was certainly quantity here. It was important for building up his body.

"I, I'm not sure it'll all go down."

"Force it down. If you don't, your training will go to waste. You have to eat even more than you've worked out or you'll defeat the point of the training."

Eat a lot after exercise—this was one of the fundamentals that Blood had repeatedly drilled into me. If Al couldn't do this, the training wouldn't serve its purpose. It was better not to exercise at all than to weaken your muscles by exercising while fasting.

"There's no need to rush, but get it all into your body."

“O-Okay...”

After saying grace, I poured the herbal tea I’d boiled into two cups while watching Al slowly attack the meal. I was training every day just as he was, so I kept quiet as I chewed and drank. I had no intention of going out of my way to start a conversation with someone who was clearly worn out and tiring him out further.

I chewed the distinctive multigrain bread and tried to recall where in my previous world had heavy, somewhat sour bread like this. Perhaps it was somewhere like Germany? As I thought idly about things like that, Al sat up straight and opened his mouth. “Um... I’d like to... thank you again.”

“Hm? What’s up?”

“I really am very grateful for everything you’re doing for me. Taking me in as your squire, giving me training and even food and pay...” His hazel eyes were locked on me. I put down the piece of bread I had pinched between my fingers and met his gaze.

“Do you... know about our past?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Th-Then, you know about my position, too?”

“I think I have a pretty good idea. I won’t probe into it. You can tell me any time you like or not at all.”

“Yes, sir...” Al lowered his gaze slightly.

Even the name I was calling him by was probably an abbreviation. I still didn’t know his real name.

“I... was nobility within the clan.”

“Right.”

“My mother and father passed away from illness when I was young, so I was brought up by the clan, protected from trouble.”

“It certainly looked that way.”

He looked like he was being greatly cherished. But that was exactly why he’d

developed this complex.

“But a part of me wondered whether that was okay,” he said. “We dwarves look up to the god of fire as our creator. Our pride is a warrior’s pride. Yet I, who bear responsibility to that clan, am so weak and cowardly...”

He might also have been feeling a sense of duty and responsibility as someone born into nobility.

“Wh-When I heard about you, I admired you. You’re about the same age as me, and you already have many great tales told about you and are looked up to as the lord of an entire region. I wanted to be like you.” The tension in his face relaxed and a toothy grin replaced it. “So... being able to serve by your side is like a dream. I can’t tell you how happy I am that I can learn of warriors and bravery from you.”

His smile was contagious, and made me feel a kind of ticklish happiness. “Thanks.” I laughed, embarrassed. “Even if this arrangement is only temporary, I’ll work hard to be a fitting master for you.”

Then, I smiled a little nervously, and added, “But I’m not very confident I can teach you about bravery.”



Al looked at me blankly. It was as if he didn’t understand what I was telling him.

“Umm...”

“What I mean is, I’m not actually very brave.”

There was a pause before he responded. “Even though you stood up against a wyvern and a chimera?”

I nodded. “Listen, Al. The world at large might see those as the actions of a brave man. They might see me as a champion standing up against terrifying monsters. But I’m not so sure.”

I really couldn’t see it that way myself. After all—

“Can you really call it ‘bravery’ to challenge an opponent when you know for a fact you can win?”

Al goggled at me. “You knew for a fact you could win?”

“I mean it.”

That was just how it was. If I had to go against that wyvern again and fight it bare-handed a hundred more times, I was sure I’d win at least ninety-nine. Even if I had to take on that chimera, as long as I had the right weapons and armor, I would almost never be bested.

“I’m overwhelmingly more powerful than a wyvern or a chimera. That’s my most honest analysis. I can kill those things just by trusting my training to make the right moves.”

Al was speechless. It looked like he didn’t know how he should respond.

“I’m probably a lot stronger than you and the others imagine.”

In fact, probably the only ones to have a concrete grasp on just how much I deviated from ordinary people were Menel, Reystov, and maybe a few others with good eyes.

“They don’t scare me. Wyverns or chimeras.”

Only once had I felt fear from an opponent’s strength in battle: that being shrouded in black mist. I had despaired, fallen to my knees, and curled up on the ground. And the reason I was able to stand up again had absolutely nothing to do with being brave. If I’d been alone, I was sure that I’d have stayed there clutching my head until the storm was entirely past, crushed under the weight of my fear and despair.

“A person who beats those far weaker than himself is no brave hero. Winning against something that doesn’t scare you isn’t bravery.”

“Then—” Al hesitated for a moment before asking. “Then what *is* bravery?”

“Honestly? I’d like to know that too.”

I’d been able to stand back up only because Mary had been there to admonish me. I’d forced my shaking legs forward because I wanted to protect those three. It wasn’t that I was especially brimming with courage. In fact, I wasn’t relying very much on my mental strength at all. I had a well-trained body and was well prepared. I was winning because I had every right to win. That was

all.

Perhaps my old nature had carried over into this world. Maybe I really was a coward.

“How are you meant to challenge an opponent who’s stronger than you? Hopelessly stronger than you?”

The time for battle was drawing near, and I doubted I would get a chance to put together a surefire winning strategy. When that time came, would I be able to fight? Did I have that much bravery?



That afternoon, Al and I were in my office getting the small amount of paperwork I had to do out of the way when I heard noises at the entrance to the mansion. Wondering whether I had a visitor, I put the paperwork away for now. Then, there was a knock at the door.

“William, I’m back,” said a familiar voice. The door opened, and there stood a man with an unshaven face, piercing eyes, and a well-built body. His thick beast-hide cloak was mottled with blood spatter and grass stains that couldn’t be washed off. He was an adventurer who carried the title of “the Penetrator.”

“Reystov! Welcome back! How’d it go?”

“I dispatched all the beasts you ordered. There were a few Commander demons going around leading troops, so I took care of those as well.”

Beast Woods was vast. Beasts and demons showed up all over it to cause problems. It was physically impossible for me to handle them all by myself. I always struggled to secure people who had both a trustworthy personality and the necessary combat skills to solve these issues. Reystov, meanwhile, was an adventurer seeking strong, substantial enemies to defeat for honor and glory. His skills with a sword, especially his lightning-quick thrusts, were the stuff of epics, and he was a loyal adventurer with class among a sea of ruffians.



In short, our interests basically matched. I guaranteed his basic needs and provided a steady stream of enemies. He lent me his sword skills, defeated those enemies, and added more exploits to his name. Officially, Reystov worked for me, but actually I was the one who could stand to learn from him. He was a real veteran. This alliance, in which it wasn't clear which of us was really superior, was going very well so far.

"I didn't come across anything particularly unusual. Should I just report the details to Anna as per normal?"

"Yes, if you wouldn't mind."

"Also, I heard you had a new squire, but—" He looked at Al. "He looks like a nobody," he muttered in a low voice.

For a while now, Reystov had been going around villages far from here, so this was the first time he'd seen Al. He gazed at the dwarf standing there and said nothing for a few moments. Al tried to say something, but subjected to the man's hard stare and blunt way of speaking, he shrank back a little and produced only a whimper.

Reystov walked straight up to him. "You're stooping too much." He slapped Al lightly on the back, grabbed his shoulders, and pulled them up towards him. "Your shoulders are too far forward. It makes you look despondent and completely destroys any commanding presence you might have had. Listen closely: if you're a man, tuck your chin in, straighten your back, and keep your jaw tight. Don't let your eyes wander. Keep them trained on either the eyes or the mouth of whoever's facing you."

"R-Right!"

"Good. You look a little more respectable now." Reystov always made eye contact when speaking. "I am Reystov. You are?"

"A-Al."

"Al. I see. What do you think of William?"

"I, I respect him!"

Reystov nodded. "Then, as a squire, don't conduct yourself in a way that

lowers the status of your master.”

Al’s breath caught in his throat.

“Always walk tall and dignified, with your back straight and your eyes fixed forward. When opening your mouth, speak the right words with confidence. If you cannot, choose to remain silent instead. That is what will make you *somebody*. Got it?”

“Yes!”

As Reystov continued talking to Al, I could see Al’s back getting straighter and his eyes becoming more focused. I got the feeling that I knew how Al felt at this moment. When Reystov looked at you with that penetrating stare while giving you advice, you felt as if what he was saying was actually achievable. It gave you confidence. It might have been another one of his talents that he could have that effect on people.

“William.”

“Yes?”

“You don’t mind?”

“No, be my guest.”

Reystov could be a little too brief sometimes, but we had known each other for a few years now, so I had grown to understand him most of the time. By “You don’t mind?” he meant “Do you mind me sticking my nose in and correcting him on his demeanor and so on?”

“In fact, I was planning on asking you to help.”

“I see.” Reystov nodded slowly, then looked at Al again. “You said your name was Al?”

“Yes.”

“I’m going to speak my mind for a while.”

“Yes, sir!”

The earnest Al and the experienced and straight-talking Reystov looked like they were going to get on well together.

“Oh, Reystov?” I said, getting the sudden idea to ask him something.

“What?”

“What do you think bravery is?”

He wrinkled his eyebrows, looked at me, and said, “I don’t know what’s on your mind, but you’ll never figure that out until you stop thinking that way.”



Some time passed. As our information-gathering continued, I kept a wary eye on the Rust Mountains, but in the end, it was peace personified from summer to fall.

We had a wheat harvest and a lively harvest festival. Parties were held with freshly brewed ale and fruit wine. Gathered around a fire with drink in our hands, there was no distinction between dwarf and human. Everyone drank with a smile and made noise together. For the sake of the harmony of the city, I took the initiative and went to a bunch of different parties myself. Reystov got together with Grendir, Ghelreis, and all those others, and once they all started talking of their heroic stories, they hit it off well. Menel had his arms around Al’s and my shoulders. It was rare to see him in such a good mood.

Once autumn arrived and nutritious nuts like acorns started falling from the trees, that was the time of year to let the livestock pour into the woods. By doing this, the animals would fatten up enough to survive the winter, although a portion of the herd would then be slaughtered and their meat smoked or salted to preserve it for the cold season to come. People stepped into the forest more often at this time of year too, in search of blessings like fruits or mushrooms and firewood to help them through the winter. As the Lord of Holly had promised, the woods this year were bountiful, and everyone was pleased.

This was also a busy time of year for the adventurers.

Up until now, the people who lived in this area had been very restricted because they and their livestock would be targeted by beasts if they went into the forest. They had been forced into making meager livings within the small safe areas surrounding the villages they secured, because to go deep into the forest would have been an act of suicide.

However, two years after I arrived, this situation improved dramatically when the adventurers and I carried out large-scale beast hunts. After that, quite a large area became property of people once more. The beasts' territory shrank, and more land could be used for foraging or raising cattle. But even so, this was still Beast Woods. There were plenty of beasts that tried to make their way into the regions where people lived. Fending them off was one of the major jobs of adventurers around here, alongside exploring the ruins hidden deep in the woods.

Villages hired adventurers to be beast hunters for them specifically, in return for accommodation, food, a little money, and the hides of the beasts they brought down. Through this arrangement, the villages were kept safe and the adventurers got rewards and sometimes even honor when they took down a big enemy. Of course, they died sometimes too. I also saw the occasional adventurer accidentally develop a deep relationship with a village daughter or widow and just end up settling there.

In any case, the beast hides and bones obtained from their hunts were sold to Torch Port along with any gathered wheat, vegetables, firewood, or coal. With the money they earned, the adventurers resupplied and fixed up their equipment, and the villagers bought farm tools, daily essentials, and livestock. Through this, the villages became richer and increased their output, and Torch Port, meanwhile, got the food and fuel it needed to sustain its citizens.

The craftsmen worked busily off the food provided by the farming villages. Blacksmiths, potters, woodworkers, weavers, and more made products for both rural and urban areas. At regular and not-so-regular intervals, ships came from Whitesails loaded with goods we couldn't make in the Torch Port area. Laborers unloaded them from the ships and, in their place, loaded the ships with pottery and wood products produced here instead.

This river trading between Whitesails and Torch Port was profitable for the merchants. In some cases, they also made money by getting their hands on a warehouse or something similar and opening up shops aimed at the potpourri of people who lived in this city.

As for me, the liege lord of Beast Woods, I collected funds and labor from various points in this system and used them to govern and manage the area,

although I was reliant on the priests I'd borrowed from the bishop for the majority of the work. For example, I instituted land taxes, community service for a fixed number of days, fees to use the ports, warehouses, and markets, and so on.

And so Torch Port had a functional economy, industry, and government. At present, the city's various industries were growing every year, and although the labor market fluctuated a little, it held steady in favoring sellers by a reasonably safe amount. It was thanks to this that we weren't in a state of needing to take urgent action even though immigrants from Grassland to the north were on the rise. Although it wobbled from time to time, we had a well-balanced positive feedback loop.

This was something to be happy about, but it was important to remember that we were running a dangerous juggling act. This meant that if the balance broke down, the positive feedback loop we were currently enjoying would also collapse very quickly.

What would happen, for example, if the rural areas across Beast Woods that were the foundation of this system were badly damaged by beasts? It would result in a domino effect. There would be a food crisis at Torch Port, which depended on the villages to supply food and fuel, and on top of that, it was very possible that the fuel shortage would mean that the workshops would have to suspend operations. If something like that happened, the merchants would also have to put a hold on their business, and there would be fewer ships going back and forth. Then tax revenues would go down, our ability to deal with the problems would be lessened, and the beasts would run rampant to an even greater degree. It would be difficult to recover from that chain of events once it kicked off.

Looking at it objectively, we had very little redundancy or room to err in case something happened. Any trouble had to be nipped in the bud early.



"Haaaah!"

I felt my body lift into the air. Heaven and earth changed places. I hit the ground with my arm and correctly broke my fall. Instantly, a foot stamped down

right beside my head with tremendous force.

I'd been holding back a little bit, but even so, a loss was a loss.

"Fantastic! That was great!" I said in a cheery voice, looking up.

"Th-Thank you very much!" Al said back.

Al had been taught by all kinds of people over the past few months. He now stood up straight and carried his head high. He was really starting to give the impression of someone strong and brave. He was yet to fight any real battles, but his skills were improving greatly, and he was carrying himself more appropriately, too.

He really did seem to have a natural gift for this. Speaking purely about the matches we'd been having to practice his armed and unarmed combat, the odds were still against him in a fight against Menel, Reystov, or myself, but nevertheless, he was already looking pretty respectable. His unarmed fighting in particular was amazing.

Something I realized during our many training sessions was that dwarves were pretty well suited for grappling techniques. They were heavyset and had strong muscles but were short in height. Al was tall for a dwarf, but even he wasn't so tall as to exceed the height of a human or elf. And the fact that dwarves were short meant that they had a low center of gravity.

Amateur grapplers often imagine grappling as applying force from the top down and pressing the opponent hard as if trying to crush them, and often that's what they actually do. But the correct way to do it is to lower your center of gravity and lift your opponent into the air from below. If this is difficult to understand, try to imagine a large ball and a smaller ball about half its size pushing against each other sideways. The small ball will slip underneath and push the large ball upwards. Once the opponent's feet are off the ground, they can't apply force anymore. Become the small ball, stand firm below, and use the power of the ground to push the opponent upwards—that's one of the correct principles for winning a grapple.

In that sense, the dwarves were blessed to have short and heavyset bodies. The only problem was their short reach. I wondered if that meant that long-handled weapons would be best suited for them in armed combat.

“My lord, my lord.” Someone called for me.

I turned around to see a businesslike woman with braided, flaxen hair.
“Anna.”

Anna was one of the priests that Bishop Bagley had dispatched to me. She was always helping me out with the running of the city, religious services, and stuff like that. I’d heard recently from Bee that there was something going on between her and Reystov, but I couldn’t read that kind of thing, so I had no idea whether it was true or not.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“A situation that requires a little urgency has been brought to my attention.”

“What’s happened?”

“I’m told there has been an undead sighting in the woods.”

“Undead...”

For a while now, the main troubles around here had revolved around beasts and demons. It had been quite a while since I’d had to deal with anything involving undead.

I had arranged for matters relating to undead near Beast Woods to be brought to me first of all via the temple. I could throw it over to the adventurers, but they wouldn’t necessarily have any method for returning the dead peacefully to the eternal cycle of samsara. Granted, a few warriors with maces could pulverize a zombie or a skeleton to the point of unrecognizability and the problem would be solved for the people under threat, but I felt that was a bit too cruel. Because of my history of being raised by Mary, Blood, and Gus, I couldn’t help but feel for the undead, so I was trying to make sure that as often as possible, matters like this were handled by me personally, or failing that, one of the priests.

“Ah!” I suddenly got an idea. This might be perfect for Al’s first battle. Due to my devotion to the god of the flame, I had a large advantage against the undead. If Al got into danger, it would be much easier to support him than if we were facing a beast.

“Al, about this, I’m going to handle it personally. Will you come with me?”

Al’s face lit up. “Y-Yes, sir! Please allow me to accompany you!”



Traces of summer still lingered in the forest, which smelled strongly of greenery and soil and was full of thick undergrowth and exuberant bushes and vines. Coming through here when the visibility was as bad as this was dangerous, even if the situation had improved slightly compared to the height of summer.

I turned around to face Al, who was walking behind me. “I hear that dwarves can see well in the dark, but make sure not to over-rely on your sense of sight.”

“O-Okay.”

Al was wearing studded leather armor and a helmet, and he had a shiny battle axe in his hands. He looked pretty stylish now that he was standing up straight and was properly equipped, and all the more so because he had a solid build to begin with.

“So let’s go over this,” I said. “Where are we going?”

“Pillar Mound to the west.”

The recent beast hunts had expanded the area available to people. New ruins were being discovered frequently by beast-hunting adventurers and others who ventured deep into the woods to gather wild vegetables and hunt. The place we were heading now to get rid of the undead was just such a place. Its discoverer had called it Pillar Mound, and it was apparently a small hill with lines of old, rotting, wood posts.

“The report of its discovery was made very recently, but a search still hasn’t been carried out. There are several reasons for that. How deep into the woods it’s located—” The wind blew. A gray-white mist began to descend around us. “The fact that this area gets very misty. It’s unclear whether that has something to do with the geography, an ancient magical barrier, or if it’s something playing tricks, maybe a fae or something that’s settled here.” The mist was growing thicker with every step we took. “And lastly, the fact that there was an unholy aura about the area. The hunter who made the discovery said that they saw

‘undead,’ but...”

The experience seemed to have shaken them up quite a bit, and they were only able to give vague information about the sighting—something like a bone-chilling presence and the sense that something was moving in the mist. They might simply have been seeing things. Or it might have been a beast or a golem of some sort that had wandered out of a ruin.

“We don’t know what might turn up,” I said. “It could be nothing. An atmosphere like this can make you see things that aren’t there. But let’s be careful.”

“Yes, sir!”

We walked through the mist in silence for a little while, searching for anything out of place. Suddenly, our field of vision opened up. From behind me, Al stifled a yelp of surprise.

“Oh, wow.” The sight took my breath away. Countless rows of wooden pillars were lined up on a hill shrouded in thick fog. They seemed to have once been covered in red paint, although it was half-peeled off by now.

“C-Creepy.”

“Yes. But magnificent.” I gazed through the gray-white fog at the forest of rotting red pillars with peeling paint. The rows became more indistinct the farther back I looked and appeared to sway in the fog in the distance. They looked like the horribly twisted, slender figures of blood-red giants standing silently in this place as the last vestiges of the activity that had certainly once existed here.

I signaled with a hand gesture, and we moved carefully forward, trodding on the wet soil. Menel and Reystov weren’t here this time. It wasn’t a big enough deal for all of us to go, and we had the Lord of Holly’s prophecy to think about, so I had them standing by in Torch Port. But I slightly regretted that decision. If anything, Menel was the one suited to this kind of search. As a half-elf, he had sharp senses and could also call fairies to his aid, so he was more suited than me to this kind of reconnaissance work. That said, we couldn’t help what we didn’t have. I would just have to deal.

While casting my eyes left and right, I slowly approached the hill. The first thing I did was to check the pillars. As I thought, they were made of wood. They had been sawn with precision, were all either octagonal or hexagonal in shape, and had been buried deep into the ground. I wondered if the red was part of the customs or culture of a now-lost tribe. Perhaps it carried some kind of religious message or prayer.

A warm gust of wind whooshed by, taking me by surprise. Al let out a short scream and turned pale.

I looked in the direction he was pointing.

Behind a pillar, something was there, looking at us.



As I reflexively held Pale Moon at the ready, I looked at where Al was pointing. He was looking at something with a cracked face, brown skin that had started to rot, empty eye sockets, haphazard teeth...

It was—it looked exactly like—

“That’s not a zombie,” I said, smiling.

“Huh?”

“Come on, look more closely.” I took Al and walked closer. It was a figure carved from wood into the shape of a person. Horrifyingly black holes had been cut into the figure for eyes, and it bared rows of teeth made from the quills of bird feathers. The wood used was probably the same as the pillars.

“Maybe he’s a grave keeper?”

“G-Grave keeper?”

“Yeah.”

The fact that they had placed a frightening figure like this here probably meant that—

“This is probably a burial mound. A graveyard.”

I looked around at the lines of pillars. Each one of these was surely the tombstone of someone who had once lived here. Once I started thinking that

way, I got the feeling that it explained this strange place neatly.

“The reason for the figure with the frightening face is probably to intimidate grave robbers.”

Some may think, “It’s only a figure, what’s the big deal?” but just like the Japanese dolls from my previous world, humanoid figures that feel as if someone’s *intent* lives within them are pretty scary. It would probably seem even scarier to people who came here with a guilty conscience intending to loot the graves. It might not be able to scare off all unscrupulous people, but if at least those who still had some doubts could be kept away with this, that alone would be useful. It was kind of like fake security cameras in my previous world.

“Actually, the mist might be a magical barrier too, or some kind of agreement with a local fae.” The people of the past had probably arranged this so that the ones they loved who had passed away before them could rest in peace. “I think this place was probably made over many generations and with a lot of effort and feeling.”

I gently laid down my spear and got to my knees. Then, I put my hands together and prayed.

We haven’t come here to disturb your burial place. Please rest in peace.

After praying for a while, I opened my eyes and saw that Al had been doing the same.

“Um... but then...”

“Hm?”

“But then where are the undead?”

“Now that we know this is a grave, I’m starting to think there’s a good chance they were just seeing things.”

“Huh? I’d have thought undead would be *more* likely to show up if it’s a grave...”

Al’s words confused me. I tilted my head. “Why? *They’ve all been respectfully laid to rest.*”

Graves generally contained corpses that had been given a memorial following

a proper procedure. It was actually rare for graves to produce undead, despite the image they may conjure up.

“It’s when someone is killed and their body hidden or when a dead body is left out in the open that it becomes more likely for them to receive the protection of the god of undeath.” I paused, then added in a subdued voice, “He’s a kind god in his own way.”

“The god of undeath is... kind?”

“Yes. Really kind.” I shrugged.

Even though I had once fought him as an enemy, I had to admit it: the god of undeath, Stagnate, *was* kind. It was just that I and most likely the majority of everyone else couldn’t accept what that god viewed as kindness, and that was why we called him an evil god. But the way I saw it, that label did nothing to change the fact that he was kind.

“People suffer miserable, hopeless deaths that are too awful to watch. Stagnate, the god of undeath, can’t stand that. So just as the seasons and nature shift with the blessing of the god of the fae, the god of undeath grants all creatures who have met with death the right to overturn their tragedies by becoming undead and rising to their feet again.”

“Um—”

“Yes, I know what you’re going to say. That wouldn’t make most people happy. In fact, a blessing like that would be nothing but a nuisance.” I shrugged. “For the living, it would be a little bit unbearable to say the least if their dead parents rose rotten from the grave for a final embrace. And as for the dead, regrets of the moment just before death are usually burned into their heads. No real rationality is left; they just lose control. Only a very small subset of people can become rational undead. Only those with strong wills and souls.”

But even so—

“But even so, it’s a fact that what the god of undeath is giving is a blessing, not a curse. From the bottom of his heart, he’s trying to tell them that they don’t have to end their lives in frustration and encouraging them to overturn death with the radiance of their souls.”

“Um...” Al looked like he’d been badly wanting to say something. “Master Will, err, you know an awful lot about Stagnate. Could it be you’ve...”

Oops.

“Have you met an Echo of—no, what am I talking about. That couldn’t happen, not even to you. Have you met one of Stagnate’s Heralds or something?”

“...”

“Why are you looking away from me?!”

“N-No reason, I just, uh, I just... Hahaha...”

“Don’t *laugh!*”

“Hahaha...”



With the odd moment like that to break things up, we walked around the hill for a while, but as I expected, we didn’t spot anything suspicious.

“Yeah, it feels likely they were just seeing things.”

“S-So it was all a false alarm...”

I laughed sympathetically. “Well, it’s like that sometimes.”

Al had come steeling himself for his first battle, and it had just been a false alarm. His shoulders sank and his expression showed a mix of disappointment and frustration. “Ah—b-but, the hunter said they sensed an unholy aura, didn’t they?!”

“An ‘aura’ is a pretty vague concept, after all. With an atmosphere like this place has, if you thought you saw something undead here, you might feel like you sensed an aura, don’t you think?”

“I guess so...”

That being said, he did have a point. That ‘aura’ was the one thing that was still bugging me. If the hunter really was seeing things, we just had to go back and say it was nothing. But it would be terrible if we reported that it was nothing and then there were casualties later. With these thoughts in my head, I

went around the hill one more time.

“Hm?” Through the mist, behind bushes and undergrowth at the bottom of the hill, I got the feeling that I caught a glimpse of something. “Al, this way.” Making my way through the undergrowth, I moved towards it.

Hidden among bushes and undergrowth at the bottom of the hill was a dilapidated old door.

“Is that a way into the mound?”

It probably wasn’t very large, judging by the size of the hill. I regarded the door with suspicion. There was a chance that some magic or a trap had been set up as a measure against grave robbing, but I had to check. I mentally said some words of apology to the people buried here.

“Let’s check this out, too.”

“Right.”

I listened out carefully and cautiously placed a hand on the door. It had an extremely simple construction without even a lock, and even though many years must have passed, it still just about opened.

“*Lumen.*” I converged mana onto the Sign engraved in my favorite spear, Pale Moon, securing myself a magical source of illumination. “Okay. Good. And... *Flammo Ignis.*” I also used a Word to create fire and light the torch I’d brought with me. “Al, hold onto this.”

“Yes, sir. But why two different types of light?”

“If you were an intelligent undead who could see in the dark and you wanted to use darkness to ambush someone who couldn’t, how would you go about doing it?”

There was a long silence.

“I’m glad you understand.”

Magical light couldn’t be extinguished with water, and conversely, the Word of Negation that could erase a magical light wouldn’t erase a fire that physically existed. If we used two kinds of lights, it wasn’t very likely that we’d lose both of them at the exact same time. It was one of the fundamentals of exploring.

Once I'd prepared our light and performed a few additional equipment checks, we cautiously made our way through the wet soil passage, keeping alert for any signs of a cave-in. We soon reached the burial chamber at the innermost part of the mound. At that instant, my entire body was assailed by an abnormally dense unholy aura.

Al let out a frightened yelp. I froze completely and my hair stood on end.

No. No, something was wrong.

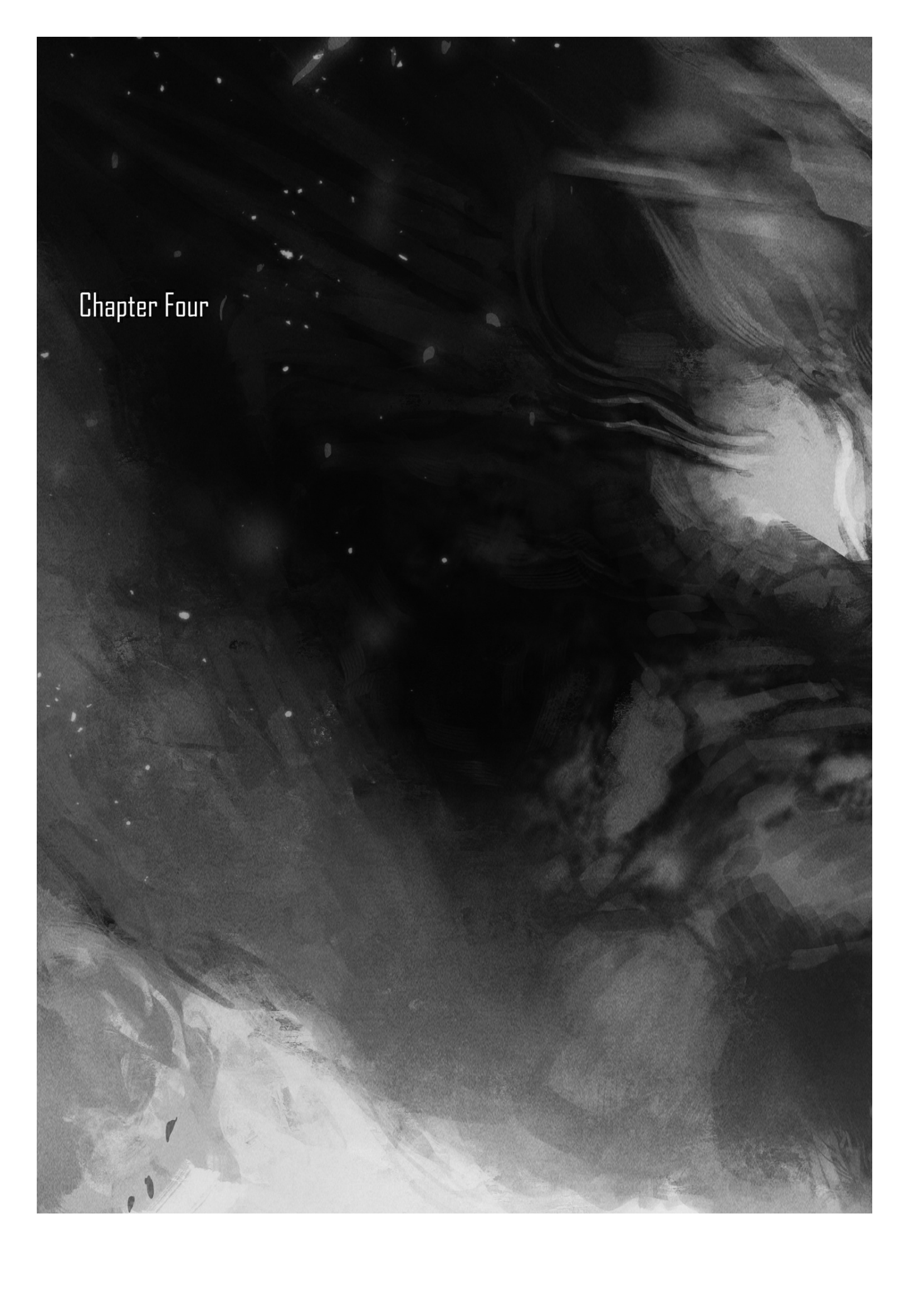
This was no normal, naturally occurring undead—

“Welcome to my temporary abode.”

A voice echoed from deep in the darkness. An icy chill ran down my spine. That thick aura, so strong it made you want to drop to your knees—I'd felt it before. Al was shaking violently, both of his hands still wrapped tightly around the handle of his battle axe.

“Has it really been two years, warrior of the flame?”

In the darkness at the back of the burial chamber, red eyes glowed. He was grinning. I could see it in his narrowed eyes.



Chapter Four

Several wooden coffins were lined up in the burial chamber. The ceiling was shaped into a stable arch, and patterns reminiscent of flowing water were drawn on the walls in vivid red. The chamber went back a little way, but it couldn't really have been called spacious.

"I can't protect both of us." I called out to Al as I took a step forward. "Run as fast as you can." I steadied my breathing, focused on the circulation of mana—

"Oop. Easy there, warrior of the flame. You too, dwarf."

I could feel his satisfied grin.

"If you're intending to fight me, you can have the victory right now. I am not an Echo today, you see."

Once he said it, I noticed. His presence wasn't as concentrated as it had been back then, nor as overwhelming. The strength of it was incomparable to the average demon or beast but, conversely, that was the extent of it. It was not the aura of that unreasonably absolute being.

I pointed Pale Moon's luminescent blade towards the back of the chamber. There was an altar where animal bones had been laid. They were probably a totem for ancestral spirits. Sitting atop the altar was a raven with glossy black feathers and red eyes that felt somehow sinister.

"A Herald."

Heralds communicated the will of the gods and were a step down from the more powerful Echoes.

"Very perceptive."

The sense that he was smiling got even stronger.

"Oh, and you can feel at ease. I haven't laid a single hand on the dead in this burial chamber. Their souls have already returned to the great cycle, and a makeshift troop would stand no chance against you anyway."

The raven's eyes narrowed.

"Yes, thanks to the thrashing you gave me, I won't be able to manifest an Echo in this land for a while, no matter what I do."

Al seemed to have been stunned to silence.

For a while, huh? How long was “a while” in a god’s terms, that was the question. Was it a few years? A few decades?

“And so, as you can see, I sent out a Herald and—”



“Decided to go fishing?”

“Very perceptive once again. My word, you are as sharp as ever.”

I got the feeling that, for some reason, he was becoming more cheerful each time he spoke.

“Nasty, you are.”

“Oh, I’m sure fishing is always very nasty business for the fish. That is the nature of a god. We cannot be measured by human standards.”

The unholy aura the hunter had sensed here in Pillar Mound must have been the work of the raven before me who was the god of undeath’s Herald. He knew that if he dangled a hook into this region with an undead sighting attached to it, I would be highly likely to *take the bait*. If he didn’t catch me the first time, he could just change locations and try again. It was a very patient and godlike approach. Only...

“It doesn’t seem like you’re after revenge for last time.”

“Yes. Firstly, I owe you an apology.”

“*What?*”

“My previous Echo displayed disgraceful behavior in its final moments. I feel deeply ashamed. There was no excuse for it.”

The raven sounded completely serious.

“An Echo is an attempt to project the power and mind of us gods into the nature of a person or fae. Some distortion is necessary. Newly born Echoes tend, to varying degrees, to be infantile, emotional, and rash. Of course, that doesn’t make it acceptable.”

My mouth hung open. I never thought I’d hear words of apology from a deity, from an actual, unmistakably real *god*.

Al’s mouth was flapping. This being’s aura alone was enough to make anyone feel certain that he was a Herald of the gods. It was no wonder that Al was so confused at the sight of him talking to me in such a friendly way.

“Oh, dwarf. This ‘warrior of the flame’ and I have crossed blades once

before. Although I had been worn down quite a bit by his mentor by that point, I must say, he was a formidable foe. How long has it been since an Echo of mine was last destroyed by a pure human? Not to mention that he seems to have become stronger still since then. He may even stand on a par with the heroes of legend if he continues to—”

“Stagnate.” I stopped him, using a deliberately threatening tone. It didn’t seem as though he was going to actively fight me, but what was in front of my eyes was still a Herald of an evil god with dangerous ideas. I had no idea what he was planning. “I have no intention of being drawn into a conversation with you. What do you want?”

“How unfriendly. What’s wrong with indulging me with a little chat? Has our relationship turned so cold?”

“What kind of a *relationship* do you think we have?”

“Come now, don’t tell me you forgot that impassioned night we spent together? We both spent a little time on the receiving end.”

“I wasn’t aware that gods enjoyed jokes.”

The raven clicked his beak in representation of a laugh.

“And so, today I have come with a topic of interest for the big, strong warrior who caused me to die a little death.”

“Do I have permission to break your neck?”

“Gracious, no. What a horrifying thought.”

While casually exchanging words with him, I tutted internally. Now that I was attempting to have a proper conversation with the god of undeath, I could understand even more deeply how formidable he was. In terms of simple strength too, of course, but even more so in terms of his other aspects.

This god could *really* speak. You could trade jokes and quips with him. If you told him your troubles, he would surely listen intently. He might even sympathize. He would try to work together with you to find a solution or guide you in the right direction with his godly powers. And he would be sincere the entire time.

Yes, as frightening as it was, he was sincere. That was what made Stagnate an extremely dangerous god. Most likely, those ultimately taken in by his charms would voluntarily become undead, voluntarily rally under his flag, and voluntarily remain loyal to him. Gracefeel, who was the god I worshipped, had been ringing alarm bells inside my mind since the beginning of this conversation, desperately urging me not to get comfortable around him.

“Your glib talk won’t work on me. What do you want?”

“Ah, yes.”

The raven batted his wings once as if to fix his appearance and faced me formally.

“Champion who defeated me, paladin of the flame—”

His oracular voice and gestures were fitting for one who proclaimed himself a god.

“Accept my revelation.”

At the moment he said it, a powerful image was thrust into my mind.

The next thing I knew, I was in the dark in the bowels of the earth. The horribly thick darkness corrupted even my sense of distance. There was only one thing I could see in its depths: a single golden eye. A long, thin pupil stretched vertically down the eye as if it had been slightly torn apart. The enormous body stirred, and the sound of its scales grated harshly on my ears. I was looking up at it. I couldn’t move. I knew I had to fight, but my body wouldn’t move. Why? *Why?*

I thought about it and realized. It was no wonder I couldn’t move. How could I move when my arms and legs had all been torn off?

The faces of Mary, Blood, and Gus floated across my mind. I thought an apology to them. They had raised me for nothing.

That’s when it snapped its fangs at me. It snapped them over and over, as if ridiculing its foolhardy, idiotic challenger. And then there was light. The toxic, burning breath stored inside its belly, a mass of incandescent heat, traveled from its belly up its throat and then, at the instant it lit up the dreadful face of

the one-eyed dragon, my consciousness ended.



I started. My mind returned to reality from the imagery that had been etched into it.

My breathing was ragged. I had only lost consciousness for an instant, but the experience had been powerful. What I had seen, I was certain, was my own death, as a possible future.

“William, thou shalt challenge the dragon and die defeated, thy purpose not fulfilled.”

His prophetic words had a ring of truth to them. Stagnate ruled over immortality, and it was probably possible for him to read that future as well.

“If you would like to spare yourself a meaningless death, do not fight the Gods’ Sickle, the foul dragon Valacirca.”

His red pupils pinned me to the spot.

“If you cannot trust me, I suggest you ask Gracefeel’s opinion. Ask whether with your power and her protection you can win against the dragon as you are now. You will get the same answer.”

The sight of a jet-black raven speaking a human tongue was uncanny and only made his words all the more powerful.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because you demonstrated that you have what it takes to be a hero.”

The raven’s reply was unhesitant.

“I adore humans. Heroes in particular, as your teachers were. A hero overcoming the impossible and ending injustice with the radiance of their soul is a sight I find beautiful from the bottom of my heart. I even believe them to be the physical embodiment of the possibilities of human beings, no, all beings.”

I let him continue.

“That is why I want to preserve that sight in an eternal form. It is unbearable to watch souls like that being dragged down from their potential by common fools and reduced to nothing, their shine dulled by suffering and regret. It is the same to imagine you killed by a worldly fool like Valacirca. The thought makes me sick.”

Worldly?

“Hm. So your research hasn’t turned that up yet. Yes, worldly. Valacirca is a foul, materialistic dragon.”

Stagnate spat out those words, and then began to talk more eloquently about him.

“Valacirca’s name as the ‘Gods’ Sickle’ originates from the time of the great wars between the good and evil gods. At the time, I was on what you might call the side of good. And Valacirca was there, too—a dragon with an overwhelmingly massive body, dark-red scales, and fiery, noxious breath. He was one of the strongest and most ferocious dragons serving the Big Six.”

He told me that Valacirca was a powerful and cruel dragon who declared openly that the only reasons he served the forces of good were that the dragons and giants who would oppose him were powerful and he would receive a good reward.

“I’m surprised the good gods felt like employing him.”

“If they had done otherwise, he would have become their enemy instead. Even that good-natured bunch are capable of calculating what’s in their own interest.”

He did have a point. It was wartime. They wouldn’t refuse help from hired fighters because of a little bit of bad manners.

“He was fixated on three things: battle, victory, and treasure. He would win, steal, and be very pleased with himself. A straightforward, beastlike nature, don’t you agree? And because of that, the Big Six were that much more cautious about how they handled him.”

He was dropped in at the most critical points and won. The dragon without a name began to be called Valacirca, the Gods' Sickle.

"At a certain point during those wars, I turned my back on the forces of good. I will avoid going into the details of what occurred after that, but ultimately a final battle took place in which the sides of good and evil were evenly matched and almost destroyed each other. The gods and the dragons were all heavily wounded, and many departed to a distant world. From that point on, the gods were limited in their ability to directly interfere with the world."

That was a piece of mythology that was passed down in this world. Because the gods interfered with the world in practical ways, unless some god deliberately spread a false story, the general outline would get passed down precisely.

"Valacirca successfully and intelligently survived this last all-out war and went to sleep."

To prepare for the next war and plunder.

"The dragon always slept a long time. Every time he awakened, he took part in a war. If there was no war, he fanned the flames himself. He did not take sides but lent his strength to all involved. And every time he did, the gods' plans were disrupted. As far as I know, the last war he participated in was the pandemonium started by those demons from Hell."

That was the Great Collapse and the end of the Union Age.

"He met the High King and lent him his power. His usual cunning and materialism, I'm sure. Swords aside, the High King wasn't one with a great attachment to treasure, you see. And Valacirca laid waste to the Iron Country, suffered a serious battle wound, and took to sleep to allow it to heal. Removed from the tide of battle, once again he cleverly excused himself..."

"W-Wait!" Al, who had been stiff with fear up until now, suddenly raised a startled voice.



"Battle wound? Did you say he suffered a serious battle wound? Did my

ancestors—”

“Hmm, what’s this? Are you a descendant of the mountain dwarves?”

“Y-Yes!”

After hearing that answer, the raven laughed. It was a joyful laugh.

“My oh my, the hand of Fate in action! Very well, then. Dwarf connected to the Iron Mountains! I, Stagnate, god of undeath, shall reveal to you the truth: the Lord of the Iron Mountains, Aurvangr, was a true hero!”

It was an innocent voice, like that of a child showing off a treasure to a friend.

“Hear this! And take pride! Calldawn, that legendary sword of many generations, stole one eye from the foul dragon that has lived since the time of the gods!”

As the god spoke of Al’s ancestors with the greatest pride, Al’s quivering hand tightened into a fist. “I-Is that the truth?”

“It certainly is. I acknowledge it here: his heroism was spectacular and satisfying to the extreme!”

Al’s voice choked with emotion. “Th-Thank you... Thank you...”

The raven that was the Herald of the god of undeath watched over Al warmly. From this scene alone, it would have been hard to think of him as an evil god. But it was also a fact that this was a god whose sympathy led him to produce a great number of undead, corrupting the laws of life and death and each time bringing about disaster.

“William, warrior of the flame, one day you may be able to surpass even Aurvangr’s glorious accomplishments and sever the head of Valacirca. But now is not that time. Avoid battle. Bide your time and train.”

His words seemed to be genuine words of concern for me.

“Even if there are victims, as hard as this may be for you to accept.”

I hesitated over how to respond. The next moment, I felt a crawling sensation run up my spine.

“Listen, the dragon slumbers lightly now.”

An underground rumbling echoed around the burial chamber.

rrrrrRRRR...

The ground shook. I could hear a roar that seemed to echo from the very depths of the earth.

rrrrrrrrRRRRR...

It was a terrifying sound that seemed to hold a tight grip on my soul. My hands were shaking. When on earth was the last time I felt fear from the roar of a living creature?

rrrrrrrrrrrrRRRRRRRRRR...

After that last roar, significantly longer than the others, the noise and the shaking both stopped abruptly.

“The dragon has demonstrated his power. To him, it was probably nothing more than rolling over in his sleep on the brink of wakefulness. But even so, I suggest you return to your territory quickly, or things are going to get out of hand.”

The god of undeath’s raven looked displeased.

— The fire of dark disaster shall catch in the mountains of rust. That fire shall spread, and this land may all be consumed.

— The dragon is coming. The dragon is coming! The dragon is coming! Valacirca! Calamity’s sickle descends upon you!

Those ominous words once again crossed my mind.



Al let out a wild yell. His weighty battle axe swung horizontally straight into the face of the crazed giant lizard, breaking bone and scattering skin and flesh.

“Hmm, another four are approaching from west-northwest. What now?”

Stagnate’s Herald-raven croaked loudly from up in the air.

Not bothering to answer him, I swung around my sling as one of the lizards sprang out of a bush to the west-northwest and landed a direct hit on its head. A red flower blossomed. I hardly looked at it. I swung around the next stone. Two more lizards leaped out one after the other. I picked one of the two and buried the stone between its eyes.

The other drew closer. Al blocked with a shield as it tried to bite him and, summoning an instant of courage, he faced it from the front and smashed his axe down into its head.

His first battle had turned out nothing like I’d been expecting. Still, he was moving pretty well.

The last one of the four came at him, too. He fended it off with the movements that had been ingrained into him by training, making panicked yelps all the while, and finally crushed it with the axe. The giant lizard kept fighting wildly until it was completely dead.

“Do you understand now? That is a dragon roar.”

It was the kind of terror only a ruler could wield, and it had the power to strike panic into the hearts of all creatures great and small. Gus had once told me that this was the reason outstanding heroes were needed to slay a dragon. It made sense. If a dragon could inspire this kind of panic just by roaring, then it wouldn’t matter how many average soldiers you assembled; they would only serve to accelerate the chaos.

After that dragon roar, we escaped from the burial chamber with dirt falling in pieces from the ceiling to be immediately confronted by beasts that had lost their minds to the dragon’s howling.

The god of undeath’s Herald-raven was yet to leave and seemed to be enjoying himself as he flew at my side. In fact, it had even gotten to the point that he was giving me helpful information about the beasts that were coming. I was thankful for that, but the sense that this could be a calculated move was making me unable to feel happy about it. What was I supposed to call this

emotion?

“Ah, hello. Northwest. Some more bad news is coming this way.”

I could hear the ground rumbling at regular intervals and the sound of trees cracking. Those were not the sounds a four-legged creature made as it moved...

“It’s a forest giant. That will give even you a bit of a hard time.”

Accompanied by the dreadful sound of living trees being torn apart, a giant appeared who was over three meters tall and wearing fur. He had a club in his hand and was foaming at the mouth. He was clearly deranged with panic. As soon as Al saw it, he bent back with a cry of horror and surprise.

“It looks like it wasn’t prepared for Valacirca’s howling. What now, hero?”

The Herald-raven looked down at me from the sky, with a genuine, irritating pleasure in his red eyes.

Forest giants lived deep in the woods and were generally mild-mannered, although it depended on the personality of the individual and the clan. They were also relatively small as giants went.

“Are you going to kill it?”

“Of course not.”

“Then you will stop it? That? How?”

“Don’t you know?”

Blood shouted inside my head.

“Get ripped, and you can solve pretty much everything by force!”

I tossed my sling aside and sprinted towards the giant.



Bellowing angrily and foaming at the mouth, the forest giant swung his club in a horizontal arc towards me. It was a very bulky club, as if a section had just been cut out of a tree trunk. I stopped dead, folded my arms up compactly, held my shield in position with both hands and my left shoulder, and took the hit head-on. There was a powerful impact. I pressed my feet down hard, and they gouged out a trail in the ground as I was pushed backwards a little.

“This is... nothing!” I pushed back.

Despite his loss of control, the forest giant seemed startled by the unexpected feeling of resistance. Hastily pulling back his club, he then released a flurry of blows with surprisingly limber movements of his arm. I took them all on my shield. A normal shield would have broken into pieces already from the impact, but I had carved layer upon layer of Signs into this one over the past two years. It wouldn't break easily. As I sustained all the giant's fierce blows, I gradually closed the gap between us.

With a loud roar, the giant finally switched to a two-handed stance and brought the club down as if to crack my head in half. It was a frontal attack that took advantage of his great height and superior body weight. As the club came down, I thought about how impressive it was that he'd had the judgment to use this particular move while in a mad frenzy.

But I'd been expecting this attack. Holding my shield at a tilted angle, I deflected his blow to my left. The feel of the strike being forced in a different direction when all his previous attacks had just been stopped by the shield took the giant by surprise, and his posture faltered. I'd been waiting for that moment. Twisting my body as I took a big step forward, I grabbed hold of the giant's thick arm, and I pulled it in towards me hard and spun my whole body in the style of a sacrifice throw. The giant's center of gravity tilted forward. He was unable to fight it. I felt the interesting sensation of a massive weight floating into the air, and the next instant, a tremendous rumble shook the earth.

“H-He *threw* the giant?” Al said, stunned.

“Yes, he did.”

I couldn't afford to pay attention to them. I ignored them, held the giant down, and immediately prayed to the god of the flame. The prayer I was using was Sanity, a so-called resuscitation miracle that caused the target to recover from confusion. I felt the power of my god being channeled through me, and then the deranged forest giant made some drowsy, confused noises and the light of sanity returned to his eyes.

“As usual, your actions leave me speechless.”

“What did you *expect* me to do?”

Unless you performed the prayer while directly touching the target, Sanity only had a mild effect, so a plan was needed if I wanted to cast it on a giant who had lost his mind. Power was needed to carry that plan out, and I happened to have it. That was all.

Get ripped, and you can solve pretty much everything by force. And if you have techniques and magic as well, that's even better.

As a rule, Blood's teachings were correct.



"I really did something sorry."

"It's no trouble. Can you get back without help?"

"I think it is get back somehow."

"Oh, uh, *'Giant-language, slightly, understand.'*"

"Ohh! *'What a surprise! That helps a lot!'*"

It was an incredibly jumbled conversation.

"Umm... the dragon... *'Dragon, howl, dangerous, is'...*"

"Yes, it is derribe, I know. *'I must return to my tribe. After that, I think I will move somewhere a little safer.'*"

"Oh, in that case, please mention the name of William the paladin. *'If, people, collide, my-name, William.'*"

"William. Paladin, William, god it. *'All right. You have my gratitude, Sir William.'*"

After I threw the forest giant, touched him with my hand, and performed the miracle of Sanity, he regained his self-control.

However, a serious problem arose when we tried to communicate: neither of us was very proficient in the other's language. Although most of the languages in daily use in this world were distantly related, all being derived from the original Words of Creation, the language of giants was a little too esoteric. Even Gus, who had taught it to me, had been working from a very patchy memory of it. That was why we were having this halting attempt at communication using

both of our languages.

“‘I am Gangr of the race of Jotunn,’ I, Gangr of Yotun, William. ‘William, champion of men.’” Gangr placed a big, rugged palm against one of mine. It was a giant greeting. We looked like an adult and a child comparing palm sizes. *“‘I will not forget this debt. If you have any troubles in the forest, call for me.’”*

“How can I call you?”

“‘Shout out: “Gangr of the Jotunn, William is here.” The trees will pass on the message.’”

The title of “forest giant” was apparently deserved. He seemed to be on friendly terms with the fae and the fairies.

After that, Gangr bowed many times to us and headed off back into the forest once more.

“That’s the first time I’ve ever seen a giant.”

“Me, too. He really took me by surprise.”

“Even though you can speak their language?!”

“My magic teacher was a walking encyclopedia.”

As Al and I talked, the Herald-raven came down from the sky. He tried to nonchalantly land on my arm, so I dodged him, and he tutted shrewdly as he landed on the ground instead.

“You saw that. That is the influence of an ancient dragon feared even by Hell’s demons.”

The god of undeath’s red-eyed Herald spoke. He was continuing the conversation we were having just before the roar from Calamity’s Sickle.

“There is no hero in this age or region greater than you. If he awakens and seeks war once again, there will be no other way to defeat him than you. But even you are not sufficient.”

“And because of that you’re telling me to accept that there’ll be some victims? Uh, we may be enemies, but that doesn’t sound like you.”

The Herald-raven made a disgusted expression.

“As vexing as it is, a thousand lives cannot replace ten thousand. Since more lives can be saved by you remaining alive, I am forced to recommend that. If it were possible, I would gladly set down an Echo and slay him myself. But unfortunately, thanks to a certain someone, I have been rendered impotent. Thanks to a certain *someone*.”

He made no attempt to hide his bitterness.

“D-Don’t any of the other gods look like they’ll make a move?”

“They have their own plans, on a far greater and all-encompassing scale. Gods like Gracefeel and myself, who rejoice and weep over the joys and sorrows of the little people, are if anything eccentrics.”

I said nothing.

“This plan does not please me, either. But I believe it to be the best plan in the current situation. Think on it very, very carefully, flamebearer, knight of faraway lands.”

With a loud flap, the Herald-raven spread his wings.

“Farewell. We shall meet again before long.”

He flew off into the mist. Al and I watched him go in silence, my expression bitter and Al’s a little disconcerted.

“He’s looking after you,” Al said.

“No, he’s got his eye on me.” I hadn’t forgotten about the death threat he gave me when I destroyed his Echo before, even if he had now apologized for it.

“They say that the gods desire heroes, people who will spread their divine message and carry out their will on earth.”

“Yes.”

“And you’re a hero who represents the god of the flame, so...”

“The god of undeath wants to put me in his debt, I bet.”

Rather than being hostile to me, he was trying to become someone beneficial to me. By doing so, he was intending to slowly mollify my hostility towards him and exploit those past favors to gradually, very gradually, break me down. For

an instant, I pictured myself reduced to an undead knight. I shook my head to rid myself of that sinister image. Stagnate was very well versed in subtle manipulation.

“What do you plan to do from here?” Al asked, concerned. “The god of undeath said that even you... um... couldn’t beat the dragon.”

“Good question,” I said. “I wonder what I’m meant to do.”

I had no good answer for him.



The creatures of the forest had been driven to panic by the dragon’s howling. I got back in a hurry and was immediately swamped with requests to take care of the damage they were causing. Reports had been coming in from all over. I dispatched adventurers and priests to many different places and busily exchanged letters with Whitesails.

Now, some time after, everything had finally settled a little. I was in Torch Port. The dragon’s roars were still continuing intermittently. At the same time, conflicts were occurring because of all the creatures changing their habitats, although they weren’t going as crazy as the first time this had happened. Naturally, we were starting to see victims as well. Fewer people and horses were traveling on the roads, and I got the impression that the ships going back and forth looked a little lonely on the river.

Everyone was terrified of the dragon—and the rumors that those *were* a dragon’s roars spread incredibly quickly—that lived in the Rust Mountains. Dragons were that much of a threat. It would only have to wake up and take to the sky on a whim, and never mind Torch Port, even Whitesails could be destroyed. It’s a fact that everyone dies sooner or later, but how many people could remain calm after hearing the roar of their own death?

At the moment, I was in the gloom of my office with all the shutters closed, passing my eyes over a letter from the temple under magical light.

A reply to my letter had arrived from Bishop Bagley.

The information he had found about the foul-dragon backed up what the god of undeath had revealed to us. Valacirca, Calamity’s Sickle, was an Elder Dragon

who had been alive since the time of the gods. Its claws tore through steel and its scales broke the swords of heroes, and as if to reflect its own nature, it had breath of toxicity and mania.

Toxicity and mania. I could never forget those properties. They were the same as the abnormal wyvern and chimera I had encountered two years ago. Those creatures were said to have been created from evil research carried out by hell's demons. They had probably been experimenting using the breath that spilled from the mouth of the foul-dragon as it slept, and mixing that breath with beasts and attempting to tame them.

In his letter, Bishop Bagley warned me that there was unmistakably a high-level demon there in addition to the foul-dragon. At length, he attempted to dissuade me from fighting, saying that I was not experienced enough, that he couldn't imagine me winning, and that there would be no shame in running away.

"No shame in running away, huh?"

He was saying that because he thought that I *would* go. What had made him think that? How exactly did he perceive me? I was still agonizing over that decision myself...

The dragon would probably awaken soon. If the god of undeath and the Lord of Holly's words meant anything, there would be casualties, too. The first thing that was likely to happen was that the dragon, once awoken, would attack a nearby settlement on a whim, and people would die.

It wouldn't end there. There's no way a lively, smooth circulation of money and goods could exist in a place that a dragon could fly over at any moment. The flow of things would stagnate, the to-and-fro of horses and ships would cease, and beasts would once again stalk human settlements as if they owned the place. Traders and manufacturers that depended on that circulation of money and goods would fail one after another, and people would start to become jobless. The destitute would turn to crime, public order would worsen, the government would become powerless, and its authority would hit rock bottom. Far more people would probably drown under the waves created in the wake of the dragon's whim than ever succumbed to its claws.

A complete region, a whole society, would be brought to ruin by a single dragon. That was a situation I couldn't allow. I had to take action to stop it, and after the dragon got started would be too late. Once there were direct victims, it would be impossible to stop the effect from spreading. I had to solve this problem before dragon fangs ever ripped into human flesh.

Yet even now, I couldn't make the decision to take action. The word around town was that some people were saying the paladin had turned chicken. I couldn't call that complete and total nonsense, either.

— ***Thou shalt challenge the dragon with the protection of the god of the flame and die defeated, thy purpose not fulfilled.***

I hadn't been able to sense any deception in the god of undeath's words. His revelation was true. I couldn't win, not right now, with the power I currently had. Ever since I'd become aware of that, I'd been unable to move forward.

Before I knew it, my hands were together in prayer.



I didn't know what to do. I offered an imploring prayer to the god of the flame, but I felt no response at all. My god wouldn't answer me anything. Of course not. God wasn't a chummy friend or a useful business contact. But I wanted to hear her voice right now. I wanted her to tell me there was a way I could win. Or even if there wasn't, I wanted her to order me to fight and demonstrate my righteousness. If she would say that to me, if I could just have her say that to me, I was sure I could head into battle.

I let out a small groan. Memories of my previous life flashed into the back of my mind: a dark room, the light of a monitor. Myself, unable to take that step forward. Time passing idly.

Time passing idly.

The feeling of restlessness burning in my chest.

Time passing idly.

Groaning.

Shedding tears.

Time still passing idly.

Unable to take that step.

Unable to take that step.

I tried to summon the courage many times, but I still couldn't take that step. Unable to step out, I continued bathing in the status quo long after the water had lost its pleasant heat. And the final collapse grew gradually closer.

I groaned again. How much had I changed since that time? My world was different. My environment was different. I had a muscular body, wondrous magic powers, miracles from God. I had been given, I had obtained, abilities like the hero of some story. I had been acting the part this entire time.

And what had changed about me?

I was stronger and could do more now. So what? Had I become able to cope with failure? Had I become able to do something to combat despair? In the end, wasn't my spineless nature still just the same as my previous life?

I heard a thick, muddy voice coming out of a pit of coal-black mud deep inside my heart. *Did you have fun, it said, winning against opponents you had no chance of losing to? It must have felt very good, being praised to the skies as a hero and acting modest. Were you able, for a brief moment, to think you could become someone successful in this world? Being loved, being raised. Obtaining incredible power. Being the center of all your friends. Being respected, being validated. You enjoyed all that, didn't you?*

But when you can't win, this is what you are.

The voice gurgled out of the black pit of mud deep inside my heart. Deep down there was my past self of my previous life. And "I" laughed, as if to say, *You know, really, don't you?*

You are me, and I am you.

I clutched my chest. I understood. Even I understood. I understood very well that I was only being weak-spirited. It was the side of me that felt sorry for myself, just like the time when Mary told me off. But my mom wasn't here to admonish me now, not anymore. I had to stand on my own two feet. But what was the way to do that? In my previous life, I just stayed down on the ground. Even this life was no different. I would have stayed down forever if not for Mary. I had no idea how it was possible to stand back up.

My thoughts went around and around in circles. I knew I'd fallen into a bad state, but I had no clue what I was supposed to do about it.

How long had I been lost in thought? I heard the sound of a knock and looked up.

"Coming in," Menel said, opening the door and entering without any hesitation. Noticing how dark the room was, he screwed up his face and quietly called out to a fairy of light to illuminate the room. "You're still thinking about it."

"Yeah."

Menel sighed. "So that's why you didn't notice. Look outside. Things are getting a little bit hairy out there."

"Huh?"

Now that he mentioned it, it did seem a little noisy outside. I opened the shutter a little way and took a peek outside the window. There was a whole crowd of dwarves in front of the mansion.



"We want to hear the paladin's thoughts!"

"Does he mean to slay the dragon or not?!"

I could see Grendir, and Ghelreis, and others I knew as well. They were all old dwarves with crude weapons over their shoulders, calling out to be heard.

"And what do you intend to do with the answer?!" Facing them was Al, standing on his own in opposition to all the other dwarves. He no longer trembled as he did that day.

“If he is thinking about slaying it, we demand to go with him!”

“And if the spirit of fear has taken hold of the Paladin, we intend on heading to the mountains on our own!”

“We dwarves are to blame for the failure to slay this dragon!”

“It is dwarven blood that must be spilled!”

“Our dishonor must be washed away with blood!”

Voice after voice cried out loudly.

“Stop this! It’s suicide!” Al spread his arms and shouted back. “The dragon is a formidable foe, and the Paladin has a plan in mind! Do not disrupt it!”

“I don’t know what you’ve been ordered, but stop trying to stall for time!”

“I have not been ordered a thing! I am telling you not to be reckless!”

“You call us reckless?!”

“Even if all of you unite to take on the dragon, you will be unable to deal him a single scratch!”

“What did you say?!” One of the dwarves had had enough. Declaring that he was letting himself through to ask me my plans, he stormed up to Al and made a grab at him.

“I told you to *stop*!” In a single flowing motion, Al knocked the dwarf’s arm out of the way, lifted him off his feet, and dropped him against the ground back-first. The crowd of dwarves broke into murmurs at this display of skill.

“You are—You have aged, all of you, so much that you cannot even win against me! Stop this! I do not wish for you all to die meaningless deaths!”

As Al shouted out in a clear voice with his head held high, everyone was silent.

Then Grendir stepped forward and slowly opened his mouth to speak.

“Young master...”

“Grendir.”

The two looked at each other.

“Young master. You have grown well. You are a sight to behold. But, but you see, that is why...” Grendir’s face crumpled. “It has been long enough... We... simply want to die...” He forced the words out. “We wished to die with our lord, on that day, in that battle, on those mountains. We have lived two hundred years since death was denied us that day. They were long centuries, spent swallowing our pride as wretched vagabonds.”

Al listened in silence and didn’t shy away from his words.

“We kept telling ourselves we had done enough, we had done enough, we had *had* enough, our obligations were fulfilled... and now, finally, we have learned that detestable dragon is alive! What is so wrong with wishing to continue from that day?! What is so wrong with wishing for battle and death?!” Grendir grabbed hold of Al as he shouted. Al allowed it and grabbed back firmly. “Let me pass! I will make the Paladin speak his mind!”

“I refuse!”

Grendir’s aged yet still muscular body soared through the air before slamming down in the yard. As if that was their signal, the other old dwarves descended on Al. Al struck them, threw them, and floored them. There were a few minutes of shouts and groans as they scuffled, and at the end, it was Al who remained standing.

“You asked me what was so wrong, Grendir.” Al stood tall as he addressed the dwarves lying flat and groaning in the yard. “All of your heads are so full of thoughts of death that you are not thinking of victory. That will not do. You must know that. When the proud warriors of the mountains lay down their lives and charge into battle, they do so to win.” His eyes were earnest, and his voice was kind. “It was all of you who taught me this.”

— *One thing is always on their minds, day in and day out. The question of what is worth laying down their life for. What is their reason to fight.* Blood’s words revived in my mind.

“It’s okay. Don’t worry. I will make you all a promise.”

— *And when they find it...*

“The Paladin *will* make up his mind. And when he does, I will go with him, and

we will win back the glory of the dwarves!”

— *They go into battle with their souls burning with the fire of courage, and never once fear death.*

“I, Vindalfr, grandson of Aurvangr, last monarch of the Iron Country, swear upon my grandfather’s name that I will take back the mountains that were once his!”

That cry was felt not just by the dwarves but by me as well. My heart beat loudly, and a heat spread through me from deep inside my chest. Now that I thought about it, Al had always been this kind of person. He was like this when I first met him in the tavern, and he was like this when he cried out that he’d become my squire. He had always been someone brave, and I had sworn to protect the ‘sincerity’ he offered me with my own hands.

“He’s pretty cool,” Menel muttered.

“Yeah.” I nodded.

“We’ve gotta keep up.”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, do you remember?”

“Remember what?”

“Your oath.”

I couldn’t help but give a small smile. “Sorry. I forgot it for a moment.”

“Heh. I thought as much.”

— *I dedicate my whole life to you! As your blade I will drive away evil, and as your hands I will bring salvation to those in sorrow!*

“You go through working out pros and cons and whether you can win or not, but the final outcome’s always been something you never bother to think about. Am I right?”

If pros and cons were what concerned me, I could have left Beast Woods alone. I could have gone literally anywhere else.

“You did what you did ‘cause it was the right thing to do. So all you gotta do is

keep that up.”

Menel smiled. I smiled back.

There was no need to think about how to stand up or summon courage. As you struggle desperately forward to protect someone or fight for something you believe in, courage comes afterwards all by itself.



Once I’d made my decision, the rest was quick.

I walked to my front door with Menel, who was kind enough to come with me. I think we were both smiling. I opened the door and, in front of Al and all the other dwarves, including the dirt-covered one who’d been thrown on the ground, I made my declaration.

“I will slay the dragon!”

Everyone stopped moving with the same shocked look on their faces.

I composed my expression and posture and continued speaking. “I have decided that I will go to slay the dragon. Al—Vindalfr—I commend your words about taking back your grandfather’s mountains. Will you accompany me?”

Al’s eyes went round. He broke into a wide smile, his hazel eyes glittering. “I had faith you would say that. Gladly!”

Menel shrugged. “You sure you want to accept that easy?”

“That’s rich coming from you, Meneldor. You’re planning to follow him no matter what happens! You’re not fooling anyone!”

“He’s learned to defend himself.” Menel laughed and gave him a nod. “We’re against a dragon, so numbers aren’t gonna help. And we can’t spare too many people who could defend the villages, either. We’ll take you, me, Will, and someone who knew the mountains two centuries ago to show us the way.”

“I would—”

“No, I will go.” Ghelreis, the dwarf with the scar, stopped Grendir as he tried to volunteer, and he put his own name forward.

“Ghelreis, you—”

“I can’t leave this to someone without a will to live. Besides, you have a duty to unite your fellows.” I noticed that Ghelreis’s clothes weren’t dirty. It looked as though he had managed to stay out of that frenzied fight and hadn’t taken Al on, either. “I will guide you.”

“Thank you very much.” I was thankful to have someone composed.

So we had me, Menel, Al, Ghelreis...

“And me.” Reystov appeared from behind a building. “I’ve packed already.”

I chuckled. As usual, Reystov wasn’t one to let a challenging foe pass him by. “Very glad to have you on board. Looks like we’re decided.”

“So us five men are off to pick a fight with demons and a dragon. It’s not gonna be a pretty trip, that’s for sure.” Menel laughed. “Do we have some kind of winning strategy?”

“No,” I said definitively. I may have been undecided for a good number of days, but I hadn’t been wasting my time doing nothing. I had been giving my magical equipment a check-up, turning the pages of my spellbooks, and moving my body as I remembered my training with Blood. And as I did all this, I thought of all kinds of plans. As a result of all that thinking, I was forced to a single conclusion. “There’s no surefire way to kill a dragon.”

They weren’t so easy that you could do something about them with a cunning plan or unusual item. That was what made them dragons. But, at the same time, this world was real. It wasn’t a computer game with systems like levels and hit points. It was possible to get unlucky and be easily killed by something much weaker than yourself, and conversely, it was possible to get lucky and kill something stronger. At the end of the day, a dragon was a living being with a body of flesh, and if its head was chopped off or stabbed through, or its heart was impaled, it would die. As low as the probability of victory was, I was certain that it couldn’t really be absolutely zero, no matter what the god of undeath said. Of course—

“The odds aren’t good. Will you still come with me?” I looked around at everyone.

“Yes, sir!” Al was the very first to nod. His eyes were clear and earnest.

“That’s where honor and glory are.”

“There could be no greater satisfaction for a warrior.”

Reystov and Ghelreis spoke calmly, with the dignity of seasoned warriors.

“I’m used to having to deal with your craziness.” Menel shrugged his shoulders, and so it was settled.

I declared it anew—

“Let’s go. To slay the dragon and take back the mountains!”

Everyone who had come to see what the fuss was about joined the dwarves in raising a huge cheer.



Sometimes, when you finally make the decision to do something and start the ball rolling, unexpected good luck can follow. This was one of those times.

With our departure looming, I penned letters to the bishop and His Excellency, brother to the king, in which I explained all the details of the situation and humbly requested for them to take care of things while I was gone. After that, I went out to my yard and was inspecting my equipment there when a red blob came hurtling towards me. I caught it in a hug, and within a moment we were holding hands and spinning around.

“Wa-haaa!!” She let out a cheerful squeal of laughter. I hadn’t heard this voice in a while. “Heheh. It’s the one and only… ME!”

“Bee! Long time no see!” Clutching my hands was a playful halfling troubadour with ears pointed like leaves and red and curly hair—Robina Goodfellow! “I haven’t seen you for months. Where were you this time?”

“Hehe. Grassland to the north. I started at the Fertile Kingdom, then I went around the coast visiting the Allied Kingdoms to the west. And now I’m back!”

“That’s amazing!”

Most of that area, I only knew through books and rumors. She traveled to so many more places than me. The circumstances of this unstable place had me running around so much that I hadn’t even managed to cross to the northern

continent at all yet.

“Was it cooler in the north?”

“Yeah, but listen, listen!”

“What?”

“A dragon roared, right?! You’re going off to kill it?”

“Yeah, I am.”

“Then I can make it into a story like we promised before?!”

“Of course. Be my guest.”

“Yahoo!” Bee did an excited little dance while still holding my hands. I ended up being spun around in the yard again. “It’s a troubadour’s dream to be able to make a new dragon-killing saga.” Bee laughed. “I’ll start by spreading around a prologue for you. You need one, right?” This smile was mature.

“Yeah, I really do. Thanks.”

Simply spreading that I had headed off to slay the dragon would do a lot to calm people, and the power of songs and stories was indispensable for that. They were this era’s media.

“It’s no problem. Just don’t give me a sad ending, okay?” She raised her eyes to mine as she said it.

I nodded. “I’ll work hard to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“Yep. Do your best. ’Cause tragic endings are *not* popular right now!”

“The audience reactions are what you’re worried about?!”

As Bee and I laughed and talked nonsense to each other, Tonio came following after her.

“Bee, you’re in too much of a rush. Please don’t leave me behind.”

“Haha, sorry, sorry!”

“Will, I’ve secured you a full suite of everything I thought you might need, including provisions, travel gear and clothes, mountain equipment, and so on.”

Tonio didn’t disappoint. He was quick to prepare. Too quick, actually. I only

just decided I was going...

“You went ahead as if I was definitely going?”

“Yes. In fact, I was very anxious that I might not make it in time for your departure. I was constantly expecting you to burst into action at any moment. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but you are very quick to act once you know you have a battle on your hands.” Tonio laughed. “I’m not sure if you were deliberating or merely biding your time, but in any event, I confess myself relieved.”

“Imma make it so he was biding his time. That way’s cooler!”

“Don’t build it up like that! That’s the reason ‘Sir William’ is turning into this massive brawny man loaded with ingenious tricks!”

I’d happened to hear a poet who wasn’t Bee reciting a story about me on a street in Whitesails, and he was using phrases like “a towering giant of a man” and “eyes of profound wisdom.” Sure, a little bit of embellishment couldn’t be helped, but I thought that people around where I hung out made too big a deal of me.

“I hesitate like anyone else. I don’t want to die or get hurt or anything.”

“But you’re going, right?”

“Yeah. It’s a precious oath I made to my god.”

Bee smiled softly when she heard that. “I’m stealing that for my story. O champion of the flame, devout warrior who serveth God, may the winds of fortune be with thee!” She strummed her rebec.

Tonio smiled gently as usual. “Will, I won’t tell you not to overdo it or try anything crazy, because I’m sure now is the time you most need to push yourself. If there is anything else you need, please let me know.”

Feeling grateful for that offer, I thought for a moment and decided to execute one of the strategies I’d been brewing.

“I would like to ask you for one thing. It’s quite big...”



Then, when I fell to sleep the night before we set off, I awoke under a starry sky of dancing phosphorescence. The ground below me was dark and reflected the stars like a vast plane of water, but in the water's surface there was the large reflection of a faint light. It was behind me. I turned to see a figure holding a lantern-like light with a long handle.

The figure was wearing a hooded robe that covered the eyes. I already knew who it was.

"It's very good to see you again, god of the flame." I bowed my head, as I had some time ago.

"..."

My god gave no response. She stood there in silence for a little while, and then—

"Victory is very unlikely."

She began with that.

"Stagnate is right. As you are now, you are not the dragon's match. But if you spend a few years training, you may contend with him."

"What will happen to Southmark in that case?"

"Man shall be there almost no more. Even the land to the north shall suffer."

"I thought so."

"You will go, then?"

I nodded. Then I bowed deeply to her once more. "Thank you for telling me it's okay to run."

I was surprised to sense slight unease coming from below her hood. Her silence felt as if she was carefully choosing her words.

Regardless of how I was feeling inside, I would probably have headed straight for the dragon if she'd simply ordered me to. I had that much of a debt of gratitude to this god of mine. And yet, for the entire time I was undecided, she didn't respond to my prayers or give me any revelations. There had to be a

reason, and I was sure I knew what it was.

“I... I would not that you should die.”

I couldn't help smiling after hearing those kind words. “I'm honored. Thank you very much.”

“But still you say you will go? To hold to the oath you made to me.”

“Yes.”

“Then I shall not say it displeases me.”

I sensed a faint smile under her hood.

“The oath you made that day belongs to the two of us.”

— *Please, go forth with me.*

On that day, I had indeed said it: that I would dedicate my whole life to her, that as her blade I would drive away evil, and that as her hands I would bring salvation to those in sorrow. Yes, I had indeed made her that oath.

“Kneel.”

I got down on my knees and bowed my head. I heard her gently lowering her hood, and I felt her walking up to me.

“I command thee, William.”

She rested her small, white hand gently on my head.

“Fear thou not, for I am with thee. Be not dismayed, for I am thy god. I will strengthen thee; I will help thee; I will keep thee with my flame.”

My god's Words and the feelings they carried slowly permeated through my entire body.

“Go, my knight. Slay the dragon and pay that which you have vowed.”

While still on my knees, I looked up at the face of the goddess smiling at me gently. I placed my hand on the left side of my chest and vowed.

“By the flame.”



When I woke up, I could feel a warm energy slowly working its way around my body. My god's words and feelings burned as a flame inside me.

Then we finished our preparations, had a huge celebratory send-off, boarded our river boat, left the city, and went down the river to slay the dragon and fulfill my oath. And that night, concealed by a nearby rocky section of riverbank, *we got straight off the boat again.*

"We'll take 'er from 'ere," one of the men said, slapping his shiny metal chestplate. A thirty-some adventurer with a red face, thick arms, and carrying a sword on his hip with a vibrant red sheath, he was one of those people who Reystov had called "bluffers" back in the tavern two years ago. I'd learned his name later; it was Marcus.

"Yes." I nodded. "Just as we discussed, please."

"Aye." Marcus grinned. "Easy money. Thanks for the job as always."

"Not at all."

"'Ere's 'oping for more in the future." Then, after slapping Reystov on the shoulder and telling him to stay alert, Marcus and his team disappeared down the river.

Reystov and I quietly watched them go. When we turned around again, Al was looking at us blankly. Ghelreis also looked a little puzzled. Menel wasn't showing much in his expression, but he looked as if he wanted to say something.

"Umm, why are we getting off here?" Al said. "It'd make sense after going a little farther, but—"

I nodded. Indeed, Al would be making a good point if we were going to continue down the river, cut through the forest, and aim for the mountain range to the west. However...

"The demons are just as aware that we would come that way."

A look of epiphany swept over Al's face, and Ghelreis nodded in understanding. Yes, in addition to the sleepy-eyed foul-dragon, those mountains were crawling with intelligent demons from Hell. If we were careless

enough to act in a way our enemies were anticipating, we would be allowing them to seize the initiative.

“We had a rousing send-off down the river. I guess it won’t be long before the lowest of the demons and their familiars start watching from a distance. You know, to try to pin down where we’ll disembark. The leaders of the demons will probably want to predict the path we’ll take. They’ll be eager to surround us and kill us as soon as possible.”

It was unclear what kind of relationship there was between the demons and the foul-dragon right now. Were they cooperating, in opposition, or simply indifferent? I didn’t even know that much. I decided to remove from consideration the extremely optimistic picture that if the demons’ base was attacked, they would leave everything to the foul-dragon while they sat and did nothing. It was probably safe to assume that they would defend themselves at least independently, or worse, by working together.

In just the same way that I’d been checking my equipment and gathering various kinds of information while I was making my decision, I was of course also thinking of a strategy for how to attack the mountains.

“Which is why...” I walked along the riverbank to a place tucked away behind some rocks. Al followed me, and his eyes went wide. What was there was the sleek silhouette of a river boat that I’d had Tonio secretly arrange for me. A surprise attack would have been the ideal situation, but the Rust Mountains were untrodden ground, which meant we couldn’t use a fairy trail. So the method I’d chosen was this one. “We’re going *up* the river.”

The Rust Mountains were once called the Iron Mountains, and a country of dwarves had prospered there. At this era’s level of technology, it would be impossible for a major city to exist anywhere except beside a large water source. Which meant that naturally, there had to be an enormous flow of water into the area. By analyzing geographic information from neighboring areas, I discovered that it was a branch of this huge river. I also confirmed it with the dwarves themselves.

The river forked somewhere further upstream and flowed to the west, so if we went upstream and then went back down again at the point where the river

forked, we could *invade from the other side of the mountain range*.

“While the demons are all on guard around the front entrance, we’ll break in by kicking down the back door.”

That was why I’d asked Marcus and the others to be decoys. They would throw off the eyes of the demons for us, toying with them by disembarking, all breaking up and going separate ways, then coming back, going out with the boat again, and doing that over and over again all the way down to Whitesails. Now that’s living up to the reputation of bluffers.

Incidentally, Bee supervised their disguises. She really got into it, giving advice like, “Act knightly, you know, kinda like you’re used to fighting! Oh, the handsome look is good, but don’t hit on anyone! Oh, and definitely don’t be wishy-washy, that’s even worse!” Thanks to her, their group took on the perfect image of the Paladin and his party that had been spread through song and poetry.

We paid them a more than satisfactory reward, and their morale was high as well after Bee declared that if we succeeded, she would tell the story of the Shadow Knights along with the story of my slaying of the dragon. And if some low-ranked demons attacked them, they had the people to deal with it, so I was confident they’d do a good job.

The only question remaining was whether we could make our way to the back side of the mountain range through the other route unnoticed while the demons’ eyes were on our diversion. Or so I thought; Al seemed to have something else on his mind.

Menel gently slapped his shoulder a couple times. “You’ll get used to it. He makes moves like this from time to time. It’s like it’s nothing to him.”

“I, I’d heard that he was a man of wisdom and courage, but to think he had military talent as well...”

“I don’t think it’s *that* much of a big deal,” I said, a little confused.

Al shook his head. “If we go even farther south than Torch Port, we’ll be heading straight into the danger area that even includes that lakeside city where the High King fell! I heard it’s shrouded in a swirling magic fog that even

seasoned adventurers can't do anything about! If you're suggesting that we deliberately choose that place to pass through—what an amazing, courageous idea!”

After hearing those words, I scratched my cheek, kind of lost for a reaction, and then said, “Uh... actually... that's where I grew up.”

Every one of them gawked at me.

Final Chapter



Under the morning sun, the invisible boat moved without sound and yet at remarkable speed. To get this result, I had cast the Word of Invisibility on the boat, and Menel had called to the fairies of wind to cast the spells Tailwind and Mute.

There was a chance that the demons plotting the resurrection of the High King were also keeping watch for people going upstream. It would be stupid if they detected us out of the blue and our attempt to outwit them was ruined, so I'd decided to take all possible measures to prevent it. We were also using a host of other techniques to hide the existence of the boat going upstream. Unless they were keeping multiple opposing factors active including the Word "See Invisibility," they wouldn't be able to perceive us.

Additionally, thinking about things from the demons' point of view, keeping watch over the upstream areas of the river was probably not worth spending that many resources on. And even when we actually traveled upstream, I couldn't sense any unusual presences or eyes upon us. It was probably safe to assume that we hadn't been found by the demons. If we actually had been discovered and a circle of demons was already waiting to close in on us somewhere up ahead, we were just going to have to say, "Well played," and cut our way through them.

Anticipating the enemy's moves in a situation like this is like moving around in thick fog. It's not like a game like chess or shogi where you can perceive all your opponent's moves. All you can do is consider as many possibilities as you can, choose the path that leaves you with the broadest set of options, and have faith in your own decisions as you move through the haze.

"Tricky," I muttered into the fog. The boat was currently surrounded by it.

After taking out the boat, I had given everyone a brief explanation of my birth. They were surprised, but they didn't doubt my story. We had that much trust in each other, and the fact that everyone treated me like a hero probably made it easier to accept the unique circumstances of my background. Menel in particular listened to me talk without batting so much as an eye. Conversely, the one who showed the biggest reaction was probably Al. Though Reystov and Ghelreis had looked at me in horror at first, they listened to me calmly as I

explained things in the proper order.

When I got to talking about the god of undeath, however, everything flipped. Al knew that Stagnate had his eye on me, so he listened calmly and even chipped in extra information; the other three who *didn't* know reacted with considerable surprise, and when I explained to them that I was a marked man and that Stagnate might interfere with this journey of ours as well, they grimaced. Demons and a dragon—that would be more than enough for anyone. I felt the same way they did.

Well, as far as the god of undeath Stagnate was concerned, I did think that he probably wouldn't proactively attack us. As much as I might have wished otherwise (and I greatly wished otherwise), he seemed to have taken to me. Though, again, I *greatly* wished he hadn't!

Just thinking about it was starting to give me the feeling that that red-eyed raven was about to fly in from somewhere. I shook my head to chase the unwanted thoughts from my mind and focused my gaze on the fog in front of me.

"Is this Maze Fog, by any chance?" Ghelreis asked.

"Yes." I nodded.

"A magic higher than Maze Alley that protects the sorcerers' Academy. I'd heard rumors, but never seen it before." This encounter with the unknown was making Reystov a little more talkative than normal.

Al was even more entranced. His eyes were sparkling and he let out a gasp of wonder.

"That's top-level magic," Menel said. "I know there was something like that in the deepest parts of my old home, the Great Forest, and I think the Eldest of Elders could use it, but a human? Not an elder of the elves who's lived a thousand years, but a *human* whose lifespan is only a few decades learned this and put it to practical use? You serious?"

I nodded. *You bet I'm serious*, I thought. *If you think this is something, just wait until you find out he lets rip with stuff like the Word of Entity Obliteration during actual battles.*

“I’ll open up a way through. Give me a moment.” I focused my concentration. I read the Words within the mana of the flowing mist, analyzed their structure, and deciphered the context.

I only realized this after entering society, but Gus’s way of writing was incredibly idiosyncratic. While he was teaching me, I just assumed that that was the way it was, but after setting out and meeting a few orthodox sorcerers, I had been astonished by the difference in their style, which was neat and emphasized readability.

How could I describe Gus’s writing? It wasn’t quite like dirty code in programming. In fact, it was more like the opposite: terrifically efficient and concise, but taken too far. It was compressed to the extreme for the sake of Gus the genius’s convenience, and that was exactly what made it difficult to read. Gus probably had no desire to enable anyone other than himself to understand the meaning of the Words he wrote. I had no doubt that if I brought a sorcerer of even considerable skill here, this mist of Gus’s would have them burying their head in their hands.

“Hmm... This Word is placed here, and this one over here, so...”

Of course, that obstacle meant nothing to me.

“Knowing Gus, he’ll have set up this here... and this will be this way... and of course the obvious answer means that right here is a trap...” I made my fingers dance and cast Words into the appropriate places within the mist. The mist smoothly receded, leaving a tunnel-shaped passage. “Okay. Let’s go.”

It was like unlocking the door to my house. It didn’t require any real effort.



Once we escaped the long tunnel of mist, scenery unfolded all at once before us. A refreshing wind blew past. Having come all the way up the river, we saw a city of stone spread out before us, built up to the edge of a vast lake. It felt medieval, or even older. I could see tall towers and an aqueduct built with a series of beautiful arches.

All of it was aged and in ruins. Many of the buildings’ roofs had collapsed, and the plaster on the walls had fallen off, leaving the buildings in a state of pitiful

disrepair. Grass grew through gaps in the streets' stone paving, and green vines and moss clung to the buildings. The city was wasting away among the greenery as though it was enjoying a quiet doze after all of the activity that must once have taken place here, and the light of the sun shone softly over it all.

A shiver ran up my spine. This sight brought back memories. It brought back so many memories. How many times had I dreamed of returning here?

The sleek boat glided soundlessly up the river and arrived at the lake, which was filled with clear water and glittering brightly in the sunlight. I saw a small hill. On the top of that hill stood the ancient remains of a temple, unchanged, just the way I had always known it. A quiet gasp escaped my lips, and tears came to my eyes. A flood of powerful emotions tore at my heart.

"Hey." Someone clapped me on the back.

"Menel?"

"Get going. We'll tie the boat and catch up."

After that comment, I couldn't resist any longer. "Thank you!" I shouted, and I leaped from the boat towards the shore in a single bound of several meters. I was in such a rush that I almost fell over as I landed, but I hastily regained my balance and ran through the nostalgic ruined city.

As I sprinted, the scenery flew by me on both sides at a terrific speed. Jumping over anything that was in my way, I ran breathlessly like a child. The temple drew closer.

I ran up the hill. "Blood, Mary, I'm back! I'll fill you in later!" I gave a hurried greeting to their graves and performed a short prayer, then flung open the door to the temple. "Gus, I'm back!"

What I had returned to was silence. Those nostalgic sculptures of the gods looked just as they always had, bathed in the sun's rays streaming from the skylight. The temple was very quiet.

"Huh...?" I looked left and right. As I glanced around the temple, I called out several times. "Gus? Gus?"

Where was he? Gus...?

“Gus? Are you here? Gus?”

I was suddenly seized with anxiety. My chest tightened with panic.

Gus? Don’t tell me—

“BAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!!!” The loud shout from behind me caused me to nearly jump out of my skin. I turned around as the shout was replaced by gleeful cackling. “Unpreparedness is the greatest enemy of all!”

Pale and half-transparent, with unfriendly eyes and a hooked nose that made him look as crotchety as he was, wearing a robe and generally looking exactly as I’d been remembering him for years—

“Welcome home, Will.”

Old Grandpa Gus was there.





Something warm filled my heart. Once the fact that I had finally returned home hit me, I no longer knew what to say.

Gus pretended to place his hands slowly on my shoulders. Of course, Gus's spectral body and mine could never touch, but even though it might have been my imagination, I thought I could feel warmth.

"Will." Gus looked me in the eyes, and with the most serious of expressions, he said, "Have you made money?!"

"That's the first thing out of your mouth?!" As usual, he came out with something that was all kinds of awful. "How about, you know, 'You're okay,' or something like that?!"

"Oh, shut up! You were trained by Mary, Blood, and *myself*, lest you forget! The idea that you could die that easily is preposterous! I wasn't the least bit worried about your safety! Not the least bit, you hear me?!" He repeated it for emphasis.

I know that! You don't need to say it!

"Ugh. Okay, fine! Yes, I've got the money changing hands and making itself useful."

"Oh?! Specifically?!"

"I understand the strong interest, but why do you look a bit surprised?"

"Well, with you being such a kind soul, I'd been considering the possibility of you getting fleeced."

That was mean. Though, okay, yeah, I guess it could have happened.

"Umm, off the top of my head: a trading company, a port, warehouses for rent, a lumber mill, a tannery, a smithy, ceramic kilns..." I also had arrangements with each of the settlements to lend them the money to buy farming tools and livestock, and I'd put money into public infrastructure as well. I wasn't running everything perfectly in the black, but the money I spent was definitely 'living' like Gus said, so as I listed off everything on my fingers, I figured he'd be pleased enough. But his mouth was agape for some reason.

“What is it?”

“What are you involved in right now?”

“Umm, I’m the feudal lord of the area down the river.”

“Feu—?!”

“Heheh. Surprised?”

Gus hummed. “I see.” His face turned sympathetic. “So some dowager’s sunk her claws into you. You poor child.”

“Why are you assuming I’ve had... claws sunk into me?!”

“If you haven’t, I suggest the second daughter of a declining aristocratic family who’s about one step away from missing the boat. Ripe and luscious.”

“Oh my god, stop, you’re disgusting!”

That was horrible! So horrible! I mean, sure, it wasn’t like I’d figured out how to approach women and stuff, but even so... horrible!

“I won my territory and my title on my own by skill! I’m a respected paladin now, so there!” I stuck my chest out. I’d done so much in the past two years. I thought I should be allowed to brag to Gus at least.

He grunted in approval. “Yes, you have done well for your age in such a short amount of time without any prior connections.”

“See?”

“And what about love?”

I looked away.

Well, you know, I thought. Yeah. It’s like, I’m devoting my life to God, and my destiny is to fight and I might die at any moment, so, I mean, having a family and stuff like that, I’m not sure if it’s really...

“So if I understand correctly, you’re wussing out and you don’t know anyone in the first place.”

That cut deep.

“Ohhh, how I long to gaze upon the face of my great-grandchild before I move

on to the next life...”

“Will you stop being so deliberately annoying?!”

“So my grandchild turns out to be a wuss who can’t score with a single woman.”

“I, I’m, I’m not a wuss!”

“What are you, then?”

“P-Pure!”

Gus breathed a deliberately drawn-out sigh. Damn him.

“You don’t take after Blood here, I see. Before he met Mary, Blood had acquired a huge reputation for this sort of thing.”

“So Blood was a popular guy.”

“His love affairs make for quite the topic, you know.”

“Okay, stop right there. Hearing about my dad’s love life makes me feel uncomfortable.”

The worst part was that unlike with the stories I heard from Bee, Gus had actually been there, so I didn’t have any get-outs like “but it’s just a legend” to hide behind. That said, I did think Blood having a reputation where women were concerned sounded a lot like him.

“He knew exactly where to draw the line. He’d only ever lay hands on women who knew what they were getting into. When it came to starry-eyed maidens, he would simply show off a bit and give them a glimpse of a beautiful dream before going on his way. You should follow in his footsteps.”

“I said I don’t want to hear about my dad’s love life! God!”

Gus cackled. “How fun it is to irritate other people.”

“You’re supposed to be a sage, an intellectual! How is it that this conversation has been nothing but money, women, and ways to irritate your grandson?!”

Our verbal spar paused there for a moment, and we stared at each other. We both snickered, and then broke into full-blown laughter. Two years had passed, but Gus was still Gus. Somehow I felt so happy for that, and Gus probably

thought the same.

“On a more serious note, is there really no one? There’s normally *something* when you go adventuring. You know, like rescuing a strong-minded woman captured by bandits, or gallantly saving a merchant adventurer who lost her bodyguards, or recruiting a dependable swordswoman, or protecting a polite and proper lady of a fallen kingdom. Any number of things. Why are you giving me that look?”

“All of those were guys.”

He laughed his head off.



As I was talking with Gus, all the others caught up, presumably after tying the boat somewhere or having found a place to dock it. I waved to them from the top of the hill and beckoned them to the temple. I’d already told everyone about Gus, so Menel, Al, and Reystov just looked at him with faces that said, “Ah, so this must be him.”

Ghelreis, however, changed color upon seeing him.

Gus inclined his head quizzically. “How odd. Have we met somewhere?”

“I was a wounded soldier who escaped those mountains two hundred years ago, traveling sorcerer. I would never have guessed that you were the infamous Wandering Sage...”

“Ahh, that callow soldier. You’ve aged.”

“Indeed I have. I never expected the day to come when I would be able to see you again...”

I asked them to explain.

Just before the attack on the High King, Blood, Mary, and Gus had come across a group of refugees from the Iron Country. They were suffering from injury and disease and gave no names in particular. Mary gave them the best treatment she could, and Gus and Blood assisted her.

Ghelreis and Grendir, who due to being young and inexperienced had not been permitted to be part of the king’s battle array, were heading north

protecting the refugees at that time. They told me that Mary healed the wounds the refugees had suffered during repeated encounters with demons. It sounded very much like her. I could see Mary's face in my mind.

"It is thanks to you and your group that I have lived to this ripe old age and now look up to a new lord and indeed am able to travel alongside your grandson, Sir William."

"Mm. A marvelous coincidence. How wonderful."

"Even in the face of a dragon, I will show no fear. I swear it..."

"Hm?"

"Hm?"

Ghelreis and Gus sounded equally confused. There was a pause.

"Dragon?" Gus prompted.

Ghelreis nodded. Gus started shaking.

"Dragon?" Gus slowly turned his head towards me.

"Yeah." I nodded.

"Why wasn't that the first thing you said?!"

"Because you were all 'money, money, money' as soon as we started talking!"

It immediately turned into an argument.

"A dragon. A dragon?! You aren't talking about Calamity's Sickle that's been roaring recently?!"

"That's him! Valacirca!"

"You dunce, you'll be killed!"

"I still have to do it!"

"You're telling me the only way is to fight? After considering all the other ways?!"

"What other ways are there?!"

"You idiot!" Gus shouted, flinging a spectral arm into the air. "Didn't you even

consider *persuasion*?!”

It was an idea that no one had even imagined.

“P-Persuasion...?”

“The gods *hired* Valacirca. That means there’s a chance that this can be resolved with money and objects.”

Everyone looked flabbergasted.

“You know, this kind of idea feels very familiar to me.”

“That’s funny, Menel, sir, it does to me as well.”

“Mm.”

“Yeah...”

They all nodded with deep expressions. To be honest, I wasn’t sure if I was entirely content with being put in the same box as Gus, but I managed to hold back.

“Granted, I imagine it would be difficult to cajole an evil dragon that has lived since the time of the gods. But there is no need to restrict your solutions to just one. Always keep your thinking flexible. Avoid becoming blinkered.”

“Okay.”

It was a very Gus-like way of thinking, and a Gus-like way of speaking, too. I felt like I’d gone back in time, and it made me feel happier than I could explain.

Gus cleared his throat. “I apologize for that unsightly argument.” He smiled at everyone. “Friends of my grandson: A warm welcome to you all.”

I could tell from his voice that he was in the best of moods.

Bonus Short Stories

The War Ogre vs. The Wandering Sage

There was the story about traveling across wastes where myrmecoleo were rampant; the story of the night battle at the fortress in the valley, intercepting a tribe of trolls; Blood's confrontation with the Hecatoncheir, guardian of the ruins; the time when Gus had a battle of riddles against a cat sith... Even the most casual list of examples showed the incredible richness of the pair's heroic tales.

As I listened to them talk about their exploits in my usual room in the temple —

"I wonder who'd win in a fight between you two."

Those words that fell casually from my lips were the trigger.

"Well, obviously, me," they both said.

By the time I realized I'd set something bad in motion, it was too late.

"Oh? Oh? What's that, old man, you think you can win against these muscles?"

"Your so-called muscles are long gone. Do you think I'd lose to a skeleton with an empty head?"

"Oh-ho, Nice words for a formless old man who's even lost his bones. How's it feel not being able to touch money?"

"Why, you..."

The exchange, started as a joke, gradually began to heat up.

After a little back-and-forth, Blood finally said, "We're not getting anywhere throwing insults at each other. Why don't we *do this?*"

"Mm. A proof is required."

And so it was settled. There was nothing I could do about it.

The three of us were on the grassy plain at the foot of the temple hill. Blood, the bulky skeleton, had changed into full armor in a very short span of time. He was equipped with magical leather armor, a two-handed broadsword, a dagger, and a sling as well. Gus, the hook-nosed ghost, looked no different from normal, but... yeah, I was certain he had something up his sleeves.

“Right, Will! You start us off!”

“And we’ll need you to referee! It shouldn’t be difficult. We won’t go down that easily, so don’t worry about it too much. Just stop us once Blood starts whining.”

“Alright Will, once this old fogey starts making excuses and running away, be nice to him and take the hint. Twisting the facts is the only thing he’s good at.”

“Oooohh...”

“Oooohh...”

“R-Right! Okay, both of you, play fair and above board! Everything good and clean! This is a match, remember. A match, not a fight!”

I emphasized that part as strongly as I could and stepped between the two, who were glaring at each other with their faces close to touching. My Gus-facing hand slipped through him, though.

“Yeah. A match. Right...”

“Mm. A match. Yes...”

They both looked like they were plotting something, even though Blood didn’t have any facial expressions. But there was no way for me to stop whatever it was they were planning to do; I slightly understood the feeling of wanting to battle it out man against man; and finally, I did want to see them fight just once.

“O-Okay then, here goes.”

I raised my arm into the air.

“Begin!”

I swung my arm down and signaled the start of the match.



Blood was the one who made the first move. As Gus immediately tried to escape into the air, Blood whipped his sling around terrifyingly fast and hurled the projectile at Gus. It was a lead ball about the size of a skipping stone, and it had a Word inscribed on it, so it could hit Gus. Blood was pretty serious about this. And it wasn't just him; the fact that Gus used the advantage of being a ghost to immediately launch an attack from the air showed that he was pretty serious, too.

Gus tutted and dodged the attack interfering with his movement through the sky.

"Expergisci!"

He suddenly set golems in motion. When had he set those up? Lumps of earth all over began to rise up—

"You sneak!"

They were swept aside with an explosive sound. A single impact from Blood's broadsword sent one of the human-sized golems flying off into another, smashing them both to pieces.

Drawing in his broadsword with a flowing motion, Blood sprinted towards Gus.

"Acceleratio!"

Gus tried to open up distance between them, but Blood caught up with his own natural acceleration.

"Currere Oleum!"

Blood took an enormous leap to avoid the Grease spell and slashed out at Gus. That instant, Gus cast the Word of Defense with impeccable timing and sent the blade off course.

It was a fierce battle over distance. Blood closed in, Gus dodged and got away; Blood stuck fast to him, and Gus drew back. Gus fired off countless Words and Signs at high speed and attempted to create more space between them, while Blood hindered him with endless special moves and, above all, his

overwhelming physical ability.

The battle grew more serious, and both attack and defense rapidly grew faster and more complicated.

And at the moment that I finally became unable to understand the infinite flurry of attacks and feints and started to worry that things were escalating too far—

“What, pray tell, might you two be doing?”

A smiling Mary appeared, everyone froze, and the match was called. I’m sure I don’t need to mention that they received one heck of a talking-to after that.

In other words, the conclusion was this:

In a fight between Blood and Gus, Mary wins.

A Dream of Bygone Days

“Hmm... This can go with these...”

“...”

“Oh, but maybe this goes better?”

“U-Umm, Mary?”

We were in a room in the temple. Several sets of clothing were tidily folded up into piles.

Mary had been using me as her personal fashion doll for over half an hour now. This was because Blood had managed to pull out some clothes that were still in good condition from the ruined city.

Clothing would normally be in a heck of a state after a few hundred years, but if they were stored in a clothes chest with magical Signs engraved upon it, that was a whole different story.

Kids grow quickly. I too had shot up in height and was now twelve solstice years old. The clothes I was wearing last year were already far too small. Mary had, of course, been working her own kind of magic to adjust the length of the clothes I was wearing, but it looked quite a difficult task to manage. And so

Blood had been considerate and gone on a search for clothing, and he had come back with a mountain of piled up clothes that, as I mentioned, had gotten Mary completely fired up.

I never had much interest in fashion, in my last world or this one, so to be honest, I was just confused and unable to keep up. “It’s not like anyone’s coming. As long as I can wear them—”

At least that was how I saw it.

“Oh no, that won’t do.” Mary smiled. “You need to build up your knowledge of clothes, or you’ll embarrass yourself when you go out into the world someday.”

Mary took items of clothing in hand one after another and started explaining them to me. This is silk, this is cotton, this is linen. This is a plain weave, twill weave, satin weave, cross weave...

She showed me the different ways of sewing each part, the meanings of the patterns and designs stitched onto the clothes, and how to wear various fashion accessories. And while warning me that things had probably changed in the outside world, she taught me the customs relating to what people wore at each level of society.

For instance, she taught me that not all fur coats were created equal, and only the upper class could use martens and squirrels. That got a “Huh,” from me, and I started to gain an appreciation for clothing despite myself as I listened to her. I’d hardly had any interest at all up until now, and I was surprised at how many different kinds of clothing there were in the world.

“It’s incredible,” I said.

“Buildings, cooking, and clothing are things that people can’t live without. Of course there are a lot of them,” she replied primly. She seemed to be in a good mood and enjoying herself.

“You know a lot about this.”

“I liked clothes and decorations. If I hadn’t heard the voice of our Earth-Mother, I might have aspired to be a clothes-seller or a dressmaker.” Mary seemed to be looking far off somewhere. “If I’d never heard God’s voice, or if

I'd been born as the daughter of some dressmaker..."

Everyone imagines that kind of thing at least once. My memories of my previous life were still vague, but I had the feeling that there was a time when that was all I thought about.

How did things end up this way? If only I'd been born into a different family, if only I'd been born in a different country, an entirely different path might have stretched before me—

"But no." Contrary to my own thoughts, Mary smiled.

"As a dressmaker's daughter, I would never have met Gus or Blood—" She tilted her head to the side and looked at me. "And of course I wouldn't have met you, Will." Her smile made her look very pretty.

"Yeah. I'm glad you weren't a dressmaker's daughter, too." I smiled back.

Where had I fallen down in my previous life? Was it a failure that I had brought on myself through my own carelessness and complacency? Or had I become disheartened by crippling circumstances I was powerless to change? Maybe it was half and half.

I could no longer pull that memory from beyond the haze. All I knew was that at the end of it all, I stood here, in a fantastic world of swords and sorcery, raised by a gentle family of undead. I thought myself very lucky.

"Alright."

I'd lost myself in those thoughts. Mary's voice pulled me back to reality.

"That's enough talking. Let's try this one next, shall we?"

"What? There's still more?!"

Mary was a good mother on the whole, but she got like this sometimes. I wailed in protest and tried to escape, but Mary was surprisingly nimble. She caught me with no effort at all, and for a full hour after that, I was made into her personal mannequin...

Lethal Traps in Ancient Ruins

“Ooh! Hey, Will, Menel! Are you fixing up your adventuring stuff?! Show me, show me!”

We had some time free one day, so we’d spread a sheet out on the grass and were doing some maintenance work on our tools when Bee, the red-haired halfling, came bounding up to us with sparkling eyes.

“No! Hands off.” Meneldor, the half-elf with silver hair, flicked his hand at her as if swatting away an insect.

“Aww, whyyy?!”

“You look like you’d manhandle them. They’re my precious tools of the trade.”

“I would not, Menel the meanie! No one likes a fussy man, you know?”

“I’m sorted there, thanks.”

“Yep, you’re lovey-dovey with Will, after all!”

“Why’d you bring up *Will*?! I’m talking about *women*!”

There was a fun rhythm to the rally of quick quips going on between them.

“Ah, thief tools!” Bee’s eyes went straight to the item Menel was holding. It was a leather case, about the size of a closed book, containing several smaller tools. All kinds of tools were there, including tongs, hook-shaped objects, and metal files.

“Oh? A hand mirror?” Finding a slightly unusual item among them, Bee tilted her head. “What do you use that for?”

“Guess.”

“Hm.” Bee frowned and started thinking. “Signals? Reflecting light or something?”

“You could, but I wouldn’t carry it around just for that.”

“Grooming.”

“You ever seen an adventurer look neat and tidy?”

“Oh, I know! Disguises for city adventuring!”

She sounded convinced that she'd got it, but sadly that wasn't the answer.

"Well, yeah, I use it for that too"—he shook his head—"but that's not the main thing it's for." He polished the mirror, grinning. Bee thought even harder.

"Mggg... Will, hint please!"

"Okay. An old adventurers' saying: You can buy a mirror and look handsome, or lose an eye and look ugly."

"Ah! Disarming traps!" Bee yelled out.

"Right answer." Menel nodded.

I nodded too. A mirror was virtually essential for scouting ruins. Even Blood had told me about it in the past.

"You've heard of this one, right?" Menel continued. "It's a standard trap. A careless thief goes peering straight into the keyhole of a treasure chest, sticks one of his tools in there and rattles it around, and then—"

"Poison gas or needles come shooting out and make you go blind! That kind of stuff."

"That's where the mirror comes in."

"I get it. So if it looks dangerous, you don't look straight at it."

Working via a mirror made blinding traps easier to avoid.

"And we also use it for checking if a passage is safe to go through."

You could check what things were like in the corridor around the corner without poking your head out. Plenty of ruins were dens of the evil gods' minions, so this came in surprisingly useful.

"Huh! Scouting just gets brushed over a lot of the time in the stories. So it's like that! Oh, what's this one?"

"Wedge."

"Just what it looks like? How d'you use it?" Bee cocked her head to the side.

This time, I was the one to answer her. "You can use them as points to tie ropes around when dealing with steep outdoor slopes or places where it's easy

to slip and stuff.” And besides standard usages like that— “It also has another important role in holding ruin doors in place, I guess.”

“Holding them in place?”

“Because of lock-in traps.”

“Oh, right, those. I heard about them in some story. Someone went to the atelier of a great old sorcerer and got chased around by golems, then he escaped into a room and the door closed all by itself and locked him in.”

“Those are actually pretty scary.”

“They are?”

“Ya. He’s right, ‘lock-in rooms’ like that are fig scary.” Menel looked vaguely into the air, as though remembering something. “Back when they were made, the idea was apparently for whoever was in charge of the house to call the authorities or something and unlock the room from the outside once they arrived.”

But now that those houses were ruins, whoever had once been in charge of them was obviously long gone.

“Set off one of those now, and you could end up starving to death inside a room sealed tight by magic. I’ve seen one of those rooms before where some poor fecker had set the trap off. It wasn’t pretty.”

Bee and I winced audibly. I didn’t really want to imagine the despair of the person who fell into that trap *or* the gruesomeness of the scene. I could only sympathize with Menel for having inadvertently laid eyes on it.

“Ya, so if you don’t want to get caught in something like that, fixing the door in place with a wedge before going into any suspicious rooms is a standard countermeasure.”

If you stuck a wedge in first, the door wouldn’t shut completely. There would also be a gap for you to escape. It was a tool with a surprising number of uses.

“Interesting.”

“Death traps are always where you least expect them, so you can’t let your guard down,” Menel muttered bitterly.

The phrase “ancient ruins” conjures up a strong image of death traps, but the ruins of the Union Age rarely contained traps set up with the intention of killing someone. It wasn’t as if we set up those sorts of traps in our own houses and workplaces either, military bases and other very special facilities like that aside. However, the passage of time was frightening, and things could change without anyone noticing. Floors became brittle and turned into pitfall traps or descending ceilings. The cables of lifts became old and transformed them into boxes that would fall when you entered them. And absent the person whose presence was assumed, lock-in rooms became rooms of death by starvation.

“Whoever made them didn’t want to kill at all, but time comes along and converts these things into fig murderous traps.”

“Yeah. We have to factor all that in and stay alert.”

We carefully inspected our tools as we talked, polishing them and making sure they were in good repair. They were our lifelines when we went exploring dangerous ruins.

“You can never be too prepared, I guess.”

“Exactly.” Menel and I both nodded.

Evening of Rest

The cured meat was tossed deftly into the boiling pot.

A knife held in one hand worked around vegetables held in the other, and then, after being beautifully peeled and chopped into bite-sized pieces, the vegetables were plunged into the pot.

I could hear the sounds of water and crackling firewood. These were the sounds of cooking.

“I acquired some good salt-cured meat, so we have soup today.”

We were on our way to Whitesails. While we set up camp in the forest, Tonio smiled at us in good spirits as he prepared our evening meal. After determining where to camp, he had gathered dead branches, put together an oven out of stones he had found, and begun preparing to cook.

“Woohoo!” Bee started dancing. Menel wore his usual expression, but I caught a hint of a smile. I was beaming, too.

Having delicious food was a wonderful thing. I remembered reading a book on the military a long time ago in my previous life which said that whether food was warm or cold and whether it tasted good or bad had an effect on morale. At that time, I hadn’t really thought much about it, but after being born into this kind of world, I understood how true that really was.

These Beast Woods had a lot of villages in unfortunate circumstances, and due to that and other factors, we had remarkably few resources to spare on meals. But even so, it really made you miserable to eat bad food. Like gloopy wheat porridge with a weird bitter flavor and half-cooked vegetables mixed in it, or dried fish that you weren’t quite sure had been fermented or just gone bad...

“Having tasty food is good!” Bee declared with clenched fists.

“Yeah.” Agreeing, I handed her the rope to put up the tent with.

“The breakfast we had in that village this morning, no offense to them, but it was kinda terrible. So you bet I’m ready to eat tonight! Tonio, lots, okay? Make lots!”

“Yes, yes. Most certainly, Madam.”

She was quite a glutton and ate a lot for her size. It was completely believable that she was sticking with Tonio for his cooking skills.

“No but for real, this is what’s such a pain about traveling. Only two or three meals a day! In my home village, I’d have twice that!”

“Here we go, the halfling food obsession,” Menel said wearily. “Do you guys actually eat six meals a day? You serious?”

“Yep, serious. Super serious.” She laughed. “Breakfast, elevenses, dinner, low tea, high tea, and supper! Any decent halfling village will be something like that. Awesome, right?”

“Where the hell do you put that much grub? You’re gonna get fat.”

“Wow, that’s not a very nice thing to say to a lady. I move around a lot and

use up what I've eaten, obviously, and that makes the next meal taste good. Isn't that common sense?"

"Halflings. Brother..."

Bee was genuinely as brisk as she claimed, and even as she spoke, she was busily working on putting up the tent. Menel shrugged.

"Right, I guess I'll go do a bit of work as well. I'll go look for some more firewood. Hopefully there'll be something to eat, too."

"Go find some fruit or something for me, mister talented hunter."

"Sure, okay, I'll just *find some fruit*. Gods. Don't get your hopes up." And with a wave of his hand, Menel disappeared into the forest.



Before long, the tent was also finished. I used several Words and Signs to place bug repelling and early warning magic around the tent we'd erected. It was very simple magic, kind of like a charm, but there was a big difference between having it and not.

"Thanks again. Having a sorcerer around is sooo useful! Goodbye, nights of annoying buzzing noises!"

"I've seen a few sorcerers before, but Will, the way you use magic is particularly fluid."

"My teacher was all about small magic."

Gus could use any kind of magic, no matter how difficult, but he put a lot of importance on small magic like this instead. Back when I was in the city of the dead, he'd made sure to drill that message into me.

"What did he say to you?"

"Even the most indomitable hero, who can conquer any monster when it comes to battle, can eventually succumb to the poisonous bugs that plague him during his travels."

"Hmm. Was he a bit of a bore?"

"The opposite. He was actually pretty wild. From time to time, he'd blow his

own horn with these really crazy stories. But when it came to this, yeah, he had his head screwed on tight.”

Even though not much time had passed, those days in the city of the dead were already feeling pretty nostalgic to me.

“Hey! Hey!”

As I lost myself in my memories, Menel came back. He was running towards us. My hand instinctively reached for my spear as I wondered what was going on, but then I noticed he looked awfully proud of himself, and he was carrying several bundles of dead branches and a lot of red fruit.

“Forestberries?! Oh my god, they’re so rare!” Bee shouted out, her eyes sparkling.

“Found a bunch of them growing behind some rocks over there.”

Tonio thought for a moment and started talking profit. “If we can take them to a nearby town, we should be able to make some change out of these.”

“Are they that good?”

“Oh, Will, you’re so clueless!”

“Just try one already, dammit. Here!” He shoved a vivid red berry into my mouth.

I tried biting into it. An invigorating tangy sweetness filled my mouth. “This is delicious!”

“See?!”

“You three, take care not to eat too much before dinner, please.”

“Ya, I know, I know.”

As the sun slowly set, we made a lot of noise together while passing the time before our evening meal. It was an uneventful, everyday scene—but I was sure I’d look back on it someday with a smile.

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